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THE RICE-SPROUT SONG

THE RICE-

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A NOVEL OF M

PROUT SONG

EILEEN CHANG

MODERN CHINA

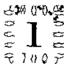
DRAGONFLY BOOKS

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To

RICHARD AND MARIE



In this country town the first buildings in sight were a string of exactly identical thatched privies about seven or eight of them They had a deserted air despite the occasional whiff of faint odor in the wind The afternoon sun shone palely on the bleached thatch

[illegible] And [illegible]

ro

hil

peaks

On the other side of the pebble-paved street the ground dropped away into a deep ravine A stone parapet ran the whole length of the road A woman came out of one of

the shops with a red enamel basin full of dirty water crossed the street and dashed the waste over the parapet The action was somehow shocking like pouring slops off the end of the world

Almost every shop was presided over by a thin fierce-looking dark yellow woman with shoulder length straight hair and a knitted cap of mauve wool pulled down square over the eyebrows a big peacock blue pompon sticking out at the left ear It was difficult to tell where the fashion had originated It bore a strong and disturbing resemblance to the headgear of highwaymen in Chinese operas One shop sold sesame cakes and rock hard black sesame candy rolls Aside from these the counter offered two stacks of little packages wrapped noncommittally in plain white paper A man came and bought a package He opened it and started to eat right there It contained five small sesame cakes The other stack must be black sesame candy rolls—unless it was also sesame cakes

Another shop displayed tidy stacks of coarse yellow toilet paper In a glass showcase standing near the door there were tooth pastes and bags of tooth powder all with colored photographs of Chinese film stars on them The pictures of those charmers smiling brightly into the empty street somehow added to the feeling of desolation

Hens stepped gingerly over the white cobblestones embedded [illegible]

There was the inevitable candle shop that also dealt in lanterns Big bunches of little red candles hung down from the rafters like some strange fingerlike berries The next shop was absolutely empty except for a little girl

seated at a table turning the handle of a bright green kerosene tin turning out homemade cigarettes

Sunlight lay across the street like an old yellow dog barring the way The sun had grown old here

A passer by an old woman with bound feet stopped the hawker to ask the price of the candy Then she peered up at him and exclaimed with pleasure 'Why if it isn t Lotus Born How are your parents and how is everybody? Is your fourth aunt keeping well?

The man at first looked blank But then it dawned on him that she was related to his fourth aunt and he re-

sweet potato dried in the sun For a hat she wore the

as if she was shouting across the length of a field

How do you happen to be in town today Aunt? asked the man

'I came along with my niece here! shouted the old woman She is marrying one of the Chous from Chou Village They are going to register today at the District Public Office The poor girl has lost both her parents all she has is a brother And with the sister in law gone to work in the city there is nobody here except the brother And you know the Chous are a big family and they are all going to turn up today It will not look right if there are too few people on our side So I have to come along

She paused to squint up at him smilingly *Ai-yah* what a coincidence—running into you like this We

just come and were resting our feet in the roadside pavilion And I said to those two I said 'You people stay here while I go first and take a peep to see if the Chous are already here We do not want to arrive before them It will not do for the bride to seem too eager

Is the groom here already?

He is here I saw some Chous sitting on the door step of the District Public Office I must go now and fetch the bride It wouldn t do either to keep them wait ing too long And you must not stand here talking all day instead of attending to your business Is business good? How much did you say the candy rolls are?

This time the man refused to tell her the price He picked up two pieces and thrust them into her hands Please take these Aunt

She pushed them away looking offended No no you are being very unreasonable! Here I am seeing you for the first time in years How can I take things from you just like that?

"But this is nothing Aunt

No no! This is simply not done Besides I have no teeth and this candy is of no use to me

'Take it home for the children"

No no pu

The gluey c

white began t

and forth betw ius grew

sticky the man grew flushed and exasperated and found it increasingly difficult to keep smiling He was only doing a duty much against his will and wanted to get it over with

The candy finally changed hands Vanquished by the

other s superior politeness the old woman murmured her farewells with an aggrieved air and turned to go The *moment she turned away the man s smile shifted ground* —it vanished from his face to reappear on hers He walked off with his flat pole his face set and strained while she waddled along grinning happily to herself

She went past the shops and the privies out past the edge of town toward the white painted pavilion built for travelers along the road

Guess who I ran into! she called out from afar You know my cousin who married into Peach Creek Village? I saw this candy seller and he turned out to be her nephew by marriage I have not seen him for so many years I almost dared not call out his name

Yes but are *they* here? The Chous her nephew Gold Root asked with some impatience He was stand *ing in the archway waiting for her He was a tall young* man large boned and good looking the color of dull pale earth His shoulders showed through his padded jacket, *worn thin with age and faded to the lightest* blue

They have come I saw them They have come

Then shall we go now? Gold Root turned to his sister Gold Flower who was going to be the bride

She did not seem to have heard him She sat with her back to him busy spitting on her handkerchief to wipe the hands of the little girl they brought along Gold Root s daughter The child was sulking because she did not see why they had to stay behind and she had climbed up and down on the bench reaching for the fan-shaped window getting her hands all dirty Later she was sure to smear the dust all over her aunt s new dress a padded gown of dark red cotton print which

would also serve as the bridal gown at tomorrow s wedding

Receiving no answer from his sister Gold Root stood looking at her helplessly his hands on his hips

Big Aunt came puffing into the pavilion 'Why aren t you people coming? she shouted

Come let us go Gold Root said to his sister Don t be old fashioned

'Who is being old fashioned? she said without turning around *But you might at least ask Big Aunt to sit* down and get her breath back She must be tired—all this walking back and forth

Come on come on! urged Big Aunt *Do not* be shy Nowadays it is not the fashion for maidens to be shy

'Who is being shy? Gold Flower stood up petulantly and led the way to town With her childlike prettiness she looked much younger than her eighteen years Her lips were slightly parted by a front tooth that protruded a little—not enough to spoil her face Her hair was puffed up high in front with a thin long fringe low on her forehead that seemed to irritate her eyes so that she was constantly squinting looking just a bit worried

She headed the little procession with the old woman dogging her steps as if afraid she might turn and flee any minute Carrying his little girl in his arms Gold Root trailed along behind them Near the District Public Office the old woman instinctively moved closer and held Gold Flower by her elbow guiding her steps as if the bride-to-be were blindfolded

"Do not be feudal Big Aunt She can walk by herself said Gold Root

Feudal feudal muttered Big Aunt I never heard such words like that until the new people came

There was a stir among the watchers seated and squat ting in front of the District Public Office They have come! The bride has come! ran the murmur Some of the Chous came forward smiling to greet Gold Root And a shrewd looking tall woman in her fifties the groom s widowed mother advanced upon Big Aunt and seized her by both hands *Ai-yah* to make you walk such a long way! The boy who was going to be the groom stood a little way off smiling vaguely Nobody looked directly at the bride though she was by no means unobserved She smiled a little at nobody in particular and looked around aimlessly

After the greetings were over they all went inside There was a whispered dispute as to who should approach the *kan pu* or cadre in charge of official affairs and make known the nature of their business The groom s side naturally should be given precedence and it happened that his mother was also the oldest of all parties concerned But she insisted that it was a man s job and that Gold Root should go Gold Root held his [illegible] who [illegible] all [illegible] the [illegible] the bride and groom stood before the desk with bent heads

'What is your name? the *kan pu* asked the young man

Plenty Own Chou

'Where are you from?

Chou Village

'Who do you wish to marry?

He mumbled very fast Gold Flower T'an

'Why do you want to marry her?

Because she can work

Gold Flower went through the same routine Asked 'Why do you want to marry him? she also murmured the standard reply Because he can work as she had been coached Any other answer would lead to further questionings and might cause trouble

The bride and groom placed their thumbprints at the bottom of the forms and were pronounced legally married But until they
they were used to
own family Outsid
and T'ans took leave of each other

Be sure to come early to dinner tomorrow Big Aunt T'an the groom s mother said repeatedly

'You go home early today and try to get some rest Y said Big Aunt
'ans walked slowly
tl n the sights Gold Flower was very quiet holding the little girl by the hand They passed the only restaurant in town a tall wooden structure which consisted of one big high-ceilinged room entirely open in front The unpainted wood was a streaky bright orange yellow In the semi-darkness of the interior dusty hams and big strips of fresh pork could be seen hanging down from the rafters while crisp cream white sheets of bean-curd skin long white cabbages and the pale-yellow bubble-studded masses that were dried fish maws all dangled above the heads of the diners The cook was at his post in front of the white-painted mud stove that stood right next to the door—the stove itself actually opened into the street With a big

flourish he dumped noodles and other ingredients into the huge black pan The mixture sizzled like pebbles in surf ebbing from a beach And a young girl in postman green pants was crouching in the street feeding firewood into the stove The gaiety and excitement seemed to over flow onto the street

The child stood at the door and refused to budge When Gold Flower tried to drag her off she wept and howled and straining backward almost sank onto the ground

Don t cry said the old woman 'Tomorrow you will get nice things to eat Tomorrow your aunt will be mar ried and we will all be going to her wedding feast We will eat pork we will eat fish! But if you don t stop

the stove turning to stare at them

sobs

Don t cry he said softly 'Your ma is coming home and she will bring you something good to eat You re- member Ma don t you?

Beckon s ma was working as an amah in Shanghai But several months ago she had written Gold Root that she was going to give notice to her master and come back to work on the land Gold Root was a landowner now after the Land Reform But as they still needed the money she earned in the city she had been putting it off Now no matter what Gold Root told the child

doubted if his wife would be home in time for the New Year

They had named the child Ah Chao or Beckon short for Chao Ti Beckon for Brother in the hope that a boy would follow in her wake But with her mother absent for the past few years she had beckoned in vain

Don t cry Beckon Gold Root kept murmuring Ma will be home soon and she will bring you nice things to eat

It did not seem to register But that evening he overheard her asking Gold Flower Aunt when is Ma coming home? Pa said Ma is coming soon

He blushed furiously at being caught thinking of his wife apparently yearning for her return It was after supper when he was standing in the doorway smoking his long pipe with his back to the room

Then he heard his sister s answer *Ai* Ma is coming home You will have Ma and you won t miss me She sounded a little sad

After he went to bed he saw that the light was still on in his sister s room

Better sleep early Sister Gold Flower he called out Tomorrow you have to walk another ten *li*

Aren t you asleep yet? Tomorrow you will have to walk double that distance You have to come back

The light burned on and he could hear her moving about her room And he was filled with a sense of loss

2

IN THE MORNING THE PEOPLE OF THE VILLAGE crowded around Gold Root s door to see the bride Gold Flower sat in state while a chosen old woman combed her hair and made up her face Actually nowa days with the hair worn short there was not much to be done and since Gold Flower had already applied powder and rouge liberally the other woman merely made a few retouches But it was a necessary ceremony expressive of the wish that the bride would live as long and have as many sons and grandsons as the old woman called the *ch uen fu t ai t ai* on this special occasion—the completely blessed lady Big Aunt was disqualified because she had lost her only son during the war He

taken away by the soldiers and had not been heard of since

At the proper time the bride started out on foot for Chou Village ten *li* away A boy cousin walking in front of her beat a big gong to herald her coming Behind her carr

an

at r

own bundle Rotund in her thickly padded long gown she had a big red artificial flower pinned on her breast, the same kind as was worn by Labor Heroes and newly enlisted men in the big meetings to recruit soldiers to go fight in Korea

As the little procession moved through the village the gong clanging methodically everywhere women and children shrieked Come see the bride! Come see the bride! A crowd saw them off at the end of the village Big Aunt stood at the front shouting auspicious sayings She would be going to the wedding feast later with her husband

Where is that old man? She looked over her shoulder He missed seeing the bride go off

The old man was sitting on a small stone well topped by two boards an open air commode by the wayside Sunning his back and smoking his long pipe he nodded affably and smiled at the bridal procession as it filed past

Big Uncle be sure to come early to the feast Gold Root shouted to him

c

c

fullness of the blue work skirt he wore over his padded

gown His eyes were white and staring, half blind from disease and he had to tilt his head at a coquettish angle to see properly

He and Big Aunt arrived at Chou Village before sun down They took their grandchildren with them leaving their daughter in law behind to look after the house The

of the sun There was about her an air of unreality and also oddly of permanence

Gold Root being *shin ch in* new relative sat at the exalted end of another table Big Uncle and Big Aunt were led to a third table and after much polite arguing were coerced into occupying the places of honor Four young women hovered around serving the dishes—presumably all daughters in law of the house With prim dig nity Big Uncle looked down into his bowl of rice pick ing at it from time to time

The food was very inferior for so important an occa sion but the groom s mother was a good hostess bustling around all the guests pointing out choice morsels apologizing for this and that She moved with surprising agility for an old lady with bound feet Observing that the old man was eating nothing but rice and very little of that she fluttered to his side a large dark slightly batlike butterfly

There is nothing much for you to eat—I blush for the poor food But at least you must have enough rice—you cannot go home empty bellied

She snatched a dish of shredded pork and bamboo shoots off the table and emptied it into his rice bowl all in one neat well rounded movement, catching him off guard The old man was meek but there was also a limit to what he could take He stood up indignantly

How am I to eat this? he demanded in a loud voice Why I cannot even see the rice! How am I to eat th s?

But eventually he subsided and with a gentle injured air started to dig for the rice buried under the juicy layer of pork and bamboo shoots

The marriage feast was half through when the *kan pu* of Chou Village came in to join them He was Comrade Fei a serious looking round faced young man with puffy cheeks and a fresh complexion In imitation of veteran cadres like Comrade Wong over in Gold Root s home village he had let his padded uniform get very dirty to show he was too busy serving the people to attend to himself A shiny patch of grease extended down his collar in a deep V And like these old Party campaigners he had a face towel tucked at the back of hi waistband to wipe the sweat off his face a habit which had been picked up from the Japanese soldiers during the war

Gold Root had also adopted the style and tucked a towel under the string that held up his padded pants Only the ends of white towel showed under his jacket at the back but it was enough to make him feel a bit self-conscious The towel had been sent him from Shang hai by his wife and was quite new for he never used it except for this purpose Four red characters printed at the bottom said Wish you good morning

All stood up to make room for Comrade Fei After much ceremonious argument it was finally the old

woman who moved over to have him sit next to her husband at the head of the table There was no wine but the unusual warmth of the crowded room in this cold weather and the effect of a full meal on empty stomachs made everybody look flushed and slightly tipsy

Comrade Fei was friendly and convivial asking all the guests how they fared during the harvest how many *tan* of grain they reaped how many catties of ramie Gold

body To Comrade Fei she flung all sorts of remarks which might not have direct bearing on the present con versation but which were always well timed and musical

oor have turned! Now

If not for Chairman

We will go on suffer ing I don t know how long if our comrades in Kêming tang had not come! Big Aunt mixed up Kunch antang Communists with Kemingtang revolutionists which only meant the early revolutionaries who had overthrown the Manchu dynasty back when Big Aunt was a young

he Communists as

Kuomintang the

to Formosa But it was a pardonable mistake at her age and on the whole she impressed Comrade Fei as being a remarkably progressive old woman

She pressed the groom s mother to eat more saying 'You are too busy looking after everybody else! You starve yourself! And she said to Beckon when the hostess piled food into her bowl See how this lady loves you! You stay here tonight all right? Your aunt is stay

al her

black eyes imperturbable

Big Aunt tried to frighten her 'We are leaving without you You are not going home with your pa You think it is that easy—you fill your stomach and just wipe the oil off your mouth and walk off? You have been sold to this house!

went up to Gold Root and hung on to him not letting him out of her sight

It was after the feast that the real fun began when the guests followed the newlyweds into the bridal chamber and thought up every means they could to embarrass the bride In the old days it was a real carnival when most rules of propriety were relaxed and uncles and grand uncles were at liberty to tease the young woman marrying into their family 'Within three days there is no difference between young and old as the saying went Usually on the next day though conditions reverted back to normal

On this occasion people seemed reluctant to let themselves go owing to the presence of the *kan pu* But Comrade Fei apparently wanted everybody to have a good time and even took the lead in things Gradually the guests warmed up and somebody shouted 'We want the bride and groom to hold hands Big Aunt officiated as the bride s spokesman making excuses and bargaining for her After a lot of heated parley the guests won their

point but the bride and groom still made no move to comply with the request It remained for Big Aunt to take hold of their hands and join them

Then somebody demanded that the bride sit in the groom s lap and call him elder brother Everybody was convulsed at the very suggestion The bridegroom made a desperate attempt to escape from the room but was grabbed hold of and pushed back to his seat on the edge of the bed beside the bride This time the negotiations took even longer

[illegible] most talking

[illegible] addressing him as the bride would Let the bride pour you a cup of tea

'Who wants tea?

The bride remained adamant in her mute unsmiling immobility Matters remained at a deadlock until Comrade Fei suggested that she should sing for them as a compromise

Hau hau! Good—good the crowd shouted

Big Aunt bargained it down to one song only At last Gold Flower stood up by the t ble and turning to face the wall sang the marching song of the *pa lu* the famous Eighth Route Army which made its name stand in the popular mind for all soldiers in the Communist rank

Another one! Let s have another one! Comrade Fei clapped and called out and everybody took it up

All right one more But after this one please let the bride have some rest It is late now and perhaps it is [illegible]

After reflection Gold Root said Of course it all depends on the *kan pu* in charge of the village

The old couple said nothing to that They all remembered the case of that woman in Peach Creek Village [illegible]

morals and easy divorces So they were greatly reassured by the measures taken by this *kan pu* to uphold the old standards Of course it was a most improper thing to do to ask for a divorce But they did think her in laws went too far when after the *Kan pu* sent her back to their house they strung her up and beat her in turn breaking three stout sticks in the process Breaking one stick would have been enough

One of the little grandchildren cried out as he slipped and [illegible]

his l [illegible]

with [illegible]

moon was high overhead oblong white and cold like a freshly peeled lotus seed and the cloudless colorless dark sky was a great desolation that closed down upon him all around The crooked little path showed up palely in the darkness Here and there by the side of the path in the fields below were the crouching forms of the tiny houses sheltering unburied coffins Families who put off burying their dead because they could not afford the expense built those little makeshift houses no bigger than a man complete with black tiled roofs and white

painted walls Too homely to be toylike they stood guard in the fields like doghouses

He had not gone half the distance when he had already worked off the dinner and was hungry again At this stage it was not a disagreeable sensation feeling all empty and clean inside and so light almost as if he could easily walk upside down and romp around the moon He wondered a little at this bottomless pit of a stomach which all his labors year in and year out could never fill

Beckon suddenly spoke Aren t we home yet Pa?

Shut your mouth—the wind is strong Shut your mouth tight

Heading for the darkness and silence that was home he missed his wife more than ever Just now at the Chous the teasing of the bride had made him think about the same scene at his own wedding The guests had made all the routine requests and had been more than usually wearisome in their demands probably because his bride had been uncommonly good looking Even after they finally left some of them had stayed behind to listen under the window and set off a string of firecrackers to scare the newlyweds

People always said he had the most beautiful wife of them all And maybe they would think that he had reason to worry when she had been alone in the big city for so long Women who went to work in the city [illegible]

great faith or a great fear or whatever it was his thoughts had always stopped before they reached that point

Perhaps he had been more uneasy than he realized and had wondered about it too long so that even her talk of coming home did not completely reassure him Ever since she had gone away he had felt ashamed of himself He had allowed such a small amount of money to stand between them In sleepless nights he thought that she too must despise him in her heart and it could never be the same again between them

The thought of her burned restlessly in him like a precarious small flame cupped in his hands against the wind its darting tongue searing his palms He did not like to recall the last time he saw her That had been the time when the soldiers were everywhere catching men and taking them to the front and the country was not safe for young men So he went to Shanghai to look for work and to see his wife He had never been out of the country before It made him feel clumsy and gawky

shaved head his ill fitting too-tight clothes He found a cousin to stay with who had a job as watchman in an alley In the afternoons he would go to visit his wife Moon Scent at her employer s house She would come down to the kitchen when she had time and sit with him on opposite sides of the greasy table both facing front She asked about everybody in the village and all their relatives in the neighboring country and he made his answers with a half-smile looking straight ahead lean ing forward with laced fingers and knees wide apart The talk was desultory but they had to keep it up as there were always people around and it would look funny if they were to sit together without speaking He wasn t

much for talking it seemed to him that he had never done such a lot of talking in all his life

The cement paved kitchen opened straight into the

wooden bars or

dark crimson

and bright as

kept coming into the kitchen and she would pause in

For some reason everybody used the back door the front door being permanently locked Moon Scent said it was the same with every house in the alley Bejeweled ladies going to parties in their shiny silk gowns and high heeled gold shoes trotted past the grimy dark kitchen and wet nurses with babies in their arms wandered in and out

He frequently ate there Sometimes when he came in too late for lunch she would fry some cold rice for him pouring oil into the pan with a defiant air She never told him about her mistress who now made it a daily practice to check up on their store of rice and coal briquettes wondering out loud at the rate at which it went hinting of a new leakage Employers never liked it when amahs had relations who showed up in the kitchen And in the case of husbands their displeasure bordered on disgust Moon Scent still remembered when one of the amahs spent the night in a small hotel with her husband causing no end of talk and shocked laughter in the household

She never told Gold Root any of these things Still he could not help sensing that his presence embarrassed and inconvenienced her At the end of a fortnight when he failed to find work anywhere he said he was going home He went to buy the railway ticket with money she gave him The trip had been entirely pointless a
ıck
nd

Before leaving on the train he had called on her for the last time They were expecting company for dinner and there would be duck feet soup Moon Scent was in the kitchen cleaning the evil-smelling bright orange webbed feet with an old toothbrush He sat down and lit a cigarette his bundle resting on the bench beside him They had drained all their conversational resources

What was that? he asked

It was a doomed hen roosting there waiting for the cooking pot with its feet tied together

The train was not due until hours later Meanwhile there was nothing to do but to sit there and wait until it was time to go Moon Scent said all the expected things over and over again for the want of conversation telling him to remember her to everybody After she finished with the ducks feet she shelled beans Then she found to her extreme embarrassment that she was throwing the beans on the ground and keeping all the pods She bent down and picked up the beans hastily Luckily there was nobody around and Gold Root did not notice anything

apprehension

When Gold Root got up to go she saw him to the door wiping her hands on her apron and smiling absently Opening his umbrella he stepped onto the yellowish-gray cement pavement dimpling with rain His heart was a trodden and squashed thing that stuck to the bottom of his soles He wished he had never come to the city

3

Gold Root took Beckon out for her to relieve herself before he put her to bed Now that Sister Gold Flower had married and left him alone with the little girl he had to take care of her himself He was not yet used to it

Outside the cold air was refreshingly astringent in his nostrils The hill overhead was a firm black bud silhouetted against the pale blue-gray of the moon washed sky Gold Root cradled Beckon in his arms holding her away from his body with his hands under her bent knees so that her fat little bottom hung down Nothing happened so he said Sh—sh encouragingly Actually Beckon was old enough to crouch on the ground

but he thought that the cold air was densest near the earth and was harmful

The dogs were barking wildly Lately he had always wondered if it was his wife coming home every time he heard the dogs bark Still holding up the child he turned his head toward the road The orange blob of a lantern came swaying gently up the bend The large red character on the lantern was of a familiar rectangular shape which he had learned to associate with the word Chou So it was somebody from Chou Village It could not be his sister who had been home for a visit only a few days ago And it was not likely that she would ever come at this hour

It was a woman though who walked behind the bobbing lantern and that was a big white bundle she had slung over her arm When the lantern swayed toward her face he saw something about her that made him whirl sharply around so that the child splashed warm urine all over his foot In no time he had put her down and was racing down the road toward his wife

He slowed down as soon as he came close enough to know for sure it was she She smiled in recognition And he called out smiling At first I thought it was somebody from Chou Village

It was getting dark when I reached Chou Village so I went to Sister s and borrowed their lantern said Moon Scent

Oh you went to their house? You saw Sister?

He was grateful for the sensation because it proved that he was not dreaming

You saw Brother in Law? he asked

He is not well I did not go into his room because he was lying down

Not serious is it? And how is Sister?

She is fine She did not think it strange that he asked after his sister whom he saw so often instead of inquiring after her when they had not seen each other for so long She knew how it was

Is Beckon in bed? she asked conversationally

He turned and yelled Beckon! Beckon! The child would not come He had to go and drag her

Ai-yah! Grown so big! Moon Scent laughed with embarrassment She lowered the lantern to take a better

blue white with moonlight The long bamboo poles the family used to weave baskets had been left out in front of the house They made a great hollow clatter when she kicked against them as she passed At this the dogs barked *more fiercely than ever*

Be careful not to trip in the dark Moon Scent shouted hurrying after her Again the bamboo poles clattered under her blundering feet They had inherited a room and a half in this old white house which was Gold Root s ancestral home The rooms next to theirs were occupied by Big Uncle s family And now Big Aunt called out shrilly from behind the window *Ai* Gold Root! Is that Sister in Law Gold Root coming home?

It is I Big Aunt! answered Moon Scent. How are you Big Aunt? And how is Big Uncle?

Hai-yah I was just talking about you I said to the old man 'What day is today? How is it—not back yet!

The oil lamp moved about behind the papered win dow and shadows shifted with it The old man coughed and children woke up crying

Don t get up Big Aunt if you have already gone to bed said Moon Scent I can come and pay my respects to you tomorrow morning How is Sister in Law Gold Have Got?

I am fine Sister in Law Gold Root replied the daughter in law of the family

'We are still up And I was just talking about you shrieked Big Aunt as she unbolted the door and waddled out on her bound feet The old man also appeared carrying his warming basket which held a few pieces of live charcoal buried under white ashes It warmed the hands and feet very cheaply

Ging lai tzaul Come in and sit down urged Moon Scent

So they all went into Gold Root s room Sister in Law

ll he time 'Why
ver returning
She pulled

Beckon who was hiding behind the blue-and white cot ton bed curtains With averted face the child clung des perately to the bedpost.

Say Ma prompted Big Aunt.

Ma! said Sister in Law Gold Have Got Say Ma Beckon

The old woman slapped the child on her behind and said accusingly See how big she has grown as if she had done some mischief

Gold Root stood awkwardly by himself in the shadows The feeling returned to him that he had dreamed of this before the scene of her homecoming with those familiar faces crowded around in the dim yellow lamplight Sometimes he seemed to be in it sometimes not as when he could not make himself heard amid the talk and laughter

Big Uncle sat smiling and poking at the ashes in his warming basket with a pair of bamboo chopsticks Primly gazing at a spot one foot above Moon Scent s head he addressed a remark to her When did the row boat arrive in town?

About noon

After walking the forty *li* from town one should at least have a drink of water thought Gold Root He went to the stove The fire was out but there was still some warm water left in the kettle enough for a bowl But returning with the bowl of water he stood confused before the roomful of people He could not very well go up to his wife and offer her water making her the sole object of his attention With some awkwardness he went up to Big Uncle and handed him the bowl Everybody laughed Big Aunt snatched the bowl and passed it on to Moon Scent forcing her to take it

See how attentive your Gold Root is! she said

They were all convulsed Even Sister in Law Gold Have Got who always looked unhappy joined in the merriment She had a long bony face with straight slit

eyes and she had a sad life She had to do a lot of social smiling but her smiles always seemed dour and reluctant And when she really opened up with heartfelt laughter as she did now somehow her face had a cynical look that was untrue and upsetting

'They have always been a loving couple Big Aunt guffawed All the time together—just like they were wearing one pair of pants *Ai-yah* it is a sin to keep them apart all these years

Look at this Big Aunt complained Moon Scent 'I see her for the first time in years and she starts at once to talk nonsense

All right all night—find me tiresome eh? Let us go old man do not outstay our welcome Let the two of them have a heart to-heart talk

'What have we got to talk about an old couple like us with the child so big already? Moon Scent tussled with her to make her stay But Big Aunt was coy 'Let us go old man do not make a nuisance of ourselves she kept saying

Laughing politely at the familiar joke Gold Root helped to detain the guests who finally let themselves be overpowered and pinned down to their seats The teasing and joking went on Almost like on his wedding night when they made fun of the bride and groom thought Gold Root. And his wife did look like a bride sitting on the bed her head slightly bent under the part ing of the bed curtains Her beautiful eyes and eyebrows had a painted look and her face was a glowing silvery white a bit broad at the base and low in the forehead. She made him think of some obscure goddess in a broken down little temple He remembered seeing an idol like that sitting daintily behind the tattered and

yellow curtains in a neglected shrine She was so beauti ful that it was difficult for him to remember that she was his wife and at times he had beaten her when he got drunk or lost money gambling

Moon Scent brought up the subject of the weather She seemed anxious to talk about something else thought Gold Root Perhaps she did not want to be teased any more about him he thought with a sudden pang

It has not snowed once this winter remarked Moon Scent How is it in the country?

The rainfall this year was very good said Big Aunt Has it snowed yet?

According to the almanac the time has not yet come for snow

It won t be good if it snows after *li chuen* the first day of spring And *li chuen* comes early this year said Moon Scent

Big Uncle said querulously after a short uneasy silence It is bound to snow within a few days my bones ache so

Big Aunt said loudly Next year s crop is sure to be good we have had plenty of rainfall

Far too much thought Moon Scent but she held her tongue She could not understand the way they rushed to the defense of the weather as if it was their own son She had been brought up in the tradition of pessimism Whether it was out of fear of jealous gods or self-defense against the endless exploitation of landlords and governments and their agents the country people never opened their mouths but to complain about the weather and crops even among themselves It had become second nature

And now they were loudly praising this year s crops

To her unaccustomed ears it sounded foolish and immod

Heaven also helped—the harvest has never been so good! You have come back just a step too late Sister in Law Gold Root or you would have seen your Gold Root being made a Labor Model Sitting on the platform a big red flower on his chest—no son of our family has been hon ored like this! The comrade of the district government pinned on the flower with his own hands!

Her practical nature would have kept Moon Scent from thinking much of such honors had they been bestowed on somebody else As it was she felt thrilled and proud She glanced at Gold Root He was being properly modest pretending that his attention was wan dering in a conversation which had grown tedious

It is not as if I am only praising him now chanted Big Aunt I have always said to our old man I said 'To be frank with you among all you Tans the only boy who shows promise is Gold Root

Moon Scent said smiling It is only Big Aunt who makes it sound so fine She questioned them about the division of land Then they told her how every piece of the landlord s furniture all his clothes all his household utensils had been numbered so everybody could draw lots for them Big Uncle s family got a vase and a girl s silk gown and Gold Root a big mirror

'Where is the mirror? Moon Scent looked around the room

'It went with Sister s dowry replied Gold Root

'You had a fine mirror a mirror of the highest quality Sister in Law Gold Root— began Big Aunt But at the

mention of that mirror the usually timid Sister in Law Gold Have Got was so beyond herself with enthusiasm that she would not even let her mother in law finish a sentence

Ah it was really elegant Sister in Law Gold Root she exclaimed Blackwood borders an inch wide carved with a swastika design It was easily two feet high—

More than that much more said Big Aunt

And with red and green streamers tied on to its corners on the day the dowry was sent over—beautiful!

Poking his fire with chopsticks the old man pointed them at Moon Scent You people drew the best of the lot

'Yes everybody said you were the luckiest said Big Aunt

Gold Root asked his wife 'Why didn t you see it when you dropped in at Sister s just now?

I *did not go into Sister s room because Brother in* Law was ill in bed Moon Scent said smiling

Be sure to go and see it someday urged Sister in Law Gold Have Got

She had not even set eyes on it and Gold Root had al *ready given it to his sister Of course if she had been* consulted she would never have said no but she should have been consulted She went on smiling but she was very displeased and felt less and less inclined to talk

In time Big Aunt noticed her silence 'This time we are really going She stood up grinning If we stay on longer we ll be cursed behind our backs

What kind of talk is this Big Aunt? Sit for a while longer said Moon Scent pulling at her arm

No really! You must be tired Go to bed early *Ai-yah*

at last the young couple is reunited Not easy! Like those two stars that meet once a year across the Milky Way—the Cowherd and the Weaving Lady

The guests filed out amid a fresh burst of laughter When all efforts to detain them had failed the hosts saw them to the door The light was burning low Instead of adding more oil to the lamp Gold Root took the stub of red candle out of the lantern lit it and stuck it on to a

and said to him in a low voice I wanted to ask you all this time but I could not in front of all those people How is it that the harvest is so good and in Sister s house they were only eating *jho* rice gruel?

Gold Root did not say anything as he busied himself with the candle

The Chous seem to be so hard up said Moon Scent We have been taken in by the matchmakers

Gold Root laughed impatiently What do you mean—taken in by matchmakers! It is the same with every fam

out lifting his arm he motioned to her to be silent. But she went straight to the window before he could stop her and pushed it open At that same instant the bamboo poles made a fearful clatter in the courtyard and all the dogs started barking far and near The moonlight had moved up the white wall leaving the courtyard entirely in shadows She leaned out and scanned the ground closely There was nobody

'Who was it? she whispered after she shut the window

He tried to sound casual There are always those loafers who have nothing to do and like to listen under other people s windows

In bed

She stared at him Then she went slowly to unpack her bundle She took out the pair of socks and pack of cigarettes which she had bought for him in Shanghai Knowing him she had on purpose chosen things which he could not give to his sister For Gold Flower she brought a face towel and a piece of scented soap These she had already presented to her when she passed Chou Village

She brought almond shortcakes for Beckon but she herself was hungry now from her long walk She opened the oil stained newspaper package

Beckon you address me by name she said to the little girl otherwise you won t get any

The cakes were crumbly round slabs of an old gold color Beckon survey them with opaque black eyes

Call me Ma Just once

It was torture but Beckon was powerless before the silence that walled her in and was growing greater and more insurmountable with the passage of every minute

It ended with Moon Scent saying All right all right don t cry You cry and I won t like you any more

They both ate and she passed one to Gold Root

'You eat he said
I brought them for you people
Save them for Beckon
'You eat There are plenty
He took it very reluctantly and ate with great restraint In the candlelight she saw that his hand that held the cake was trembling There was a moment of absolute stillness in her mind followed by a rush of anger and tenderness What had the world done to him in her absence?

Beckon finished her cake Nothing but a lingering fear of the stranger could have made her agree to leave the rest for tomorrow As she undressed her daughter for bed Moon Scent murmured *Ai-yah* look at this padded jacket so torn and not mended! Heavens so dirty! And look at those buttons! Not a single good one! Her mutterings were really directed against her husband s sister who was naturally in charge of such things during her absence But the child took it personally Tears welled up in her eyes and her quivering lips fell open

Crying again? Moon Scent asked in surprise 'What is it now? She pressed her face against Beckon s wet cheeks Hm? What is it? Tell Ma

Beckon did not answer Moon Scent lifted her onto the bed and removed her padded shoes Isn t it cold? Pop into the folded blanket—quick! Tell Ma why you are crying Still thinking of those cakes? Then sleep early so you can get up early tomorrow and eat them

Moon Scent sat on the edge of the bed spreading Beckon s clothes on top of the blanket Gold Root came and sat down beside her He fingered the corner of her jacket where the slits were and felt the material It was cotton with small mauve and gray checks and streaks of

red He smiled slightly It was difficult to tell whether he thought it too fancy or too expensive or whether he was [illegible]

ket She

Cold? Go to bed then

He leaned closer and she put up a hand and passed it slowly over his head Her hand was rough it rustled against the bristles on his shaved skull

She whispered Everybody said it is good in the coun try good in the country good in the country The cities are poor now and people cannot afford servants but they do not allow employers to dismiss servants So my em ployer was always telling me It is good now in the country If I were you I would go home and work on the land Now I realize I have been fooled

She is sorry she came back thought Gold Root She just came home and here she regrets it already Being together did not mean to her what it did to him He spoke slowly with a half smile Yes just now the times are difficult in the country Otherwise I would have asked you to come home long ago I wonder if you can get used to it

Get used to it! Her voice rose in sudden anger 'You think I had an easy life in the city? She looked at him Didn t he have any idea of what it was like in Shanghai?

He was silent She could have said more but it was after all her first day home She bent down and picked up one of Beckon s padded shoes and dusted it a little turning it over and over in her hands scrutinizing it in the candlelight

Did Sister make these? she asked critically

No her maternal grandmother made them for her

Oh She thought with satisfaction No wonder This doesn t look like his sister s work Aloud she said My mother s eyesight is still not bad then to be able to sew like this I am going home tomorrow to see my mother

Better not overdo it—to go there and come back it would be another thirty *li*

Beckon suddenly called out Pa I also want to go

Aren t you asleep yet? said Gold Root

Moon Scent bent down to straighten her blanket and smell her cheek Go to sleep quick If you don t behave I won t take you along

But for a long time Beckon could not sleep excited by the dynamic presence of the cakes in the room

Moon Scent made her hands into fists and beat her aching knees lightly I suppose I am not used to walking long distances All out of practice now

He laughed happily glad of an opportunity to scoff at her And you say you are going to your mother s to*morrow! I know you are no use*

She started to unbutton her jacket when she sud denly remembered to take the money out of her pocket and count it He would have liked to know how much she had left but she did not say anything and he did not want to ask There could not be much since she sent money home every month regularly to help him out

sum did not

He stood up

abruptly and walked away to the trunks conventionally stacked at one side of the bed

She looked up 'What are you opening the trunk for at this hour?

Silently he produced a large sheet of paper smoothed it out on the table and looked down at it patiently wait ing for her to finish with her money Then he laid the land deeds before her and said quietly smiling 'You look

They were beautifully handwritten marked with the biggest chops and seals He knew the numerical characters and he pointed out to her where his name was They pored over it their heads bent close together in the pool of light

She was very happy He explained This is our land our own land now Right now things are bad because there is a war on When the war is over it will be all right The hard times will pass And the land is always there

Sitting thus with his arms holding her snugly under her padded jacket it was easy for her to visualize the future that stretched out generations ahead like endless rice paddies in the sun and one was possessed of infinite patience

But she felt she had to make an effort to disengage his arms Beckon is not asleep yet she said

She is asleep

Just now she was talking

She is asleep Then he said 'You were not so afraid of her before

She was tiny then

He was looking at a black spot on the back of her neck Then he touched it I thought it was a bedbug he said

'There were many bedbugs on the rowboat

'It is a mole Hey when did you get this mole?

How should I know? I have no eyes in the back

You never had it before

I could have grown one in three years could I not?

He laughed shyly Yes it has been three years

All that was left of the candle on the cracked plate were some drippings—waxy petals of a little red plum blossom A long thin flame came out of the heart of the flower and rose high and wavering in the air

Beckon was dreaming of eating almond cakes at her grandmother s house Her father and her Aunt Gold Flower were there and many others But her mother was as yet too much of a stranger to enter her dreams

4

THE FROST ON THE TILED ROOF WAS MELTING in the morning sun A great dark chunk of hill hung above the roof of the house Every tree on the hill side stood out in the sunshine with the trunk reduced to a thin white line all but invisible and only the light green foliage showing so that each tree was like a flat green spot of duckweed floating over the shadowy depth of the hill

Moon Scent looked up to the hilltop where little feather-duster trees stood black against the sky The hill caved in a bit near the top A little white cloud nestled there Last night in her long walk toward home she saw a light up there and she wondered if it was a lamp or a

star If there was really a house up there then this white cloud must be the smoke of cooking It was certainly dis solving fast she thought faster than clouds usually did

Last night walking home in the dark she had stepped on the droppings left by a stray dog She wiped her cloth shoe with a wet rag and put it under the eaves to dry The best thing would be to rub it with wine She should go next door and borrow some Big Uncle had always been fond of his cup

When she came back to the village of course she had got her *lu t iao* road pass almost immediately after she applied because laborers were encouraged to return to the land That was why one saw fewer pedicab drivers on the Shanghai streets while ricksha coolies had almost en

If they both went back to Shanghai now Beckon would have to stay with her grandmother for the time being They would send some money back every month and her grandmother would be pleased with the arrangement But Gold Root would never agree to go not when he had just been given land Once they left the village, they would lose their land

And what if they could not find employment in the city? She might sit at a street corner mending nylon

stockings Perhaps she could borrow enough money from her former employer to purchase one of those kits con taining the necessary tools Nylons were still worn in Shanghai They were either old stock or smuggled in In summer when nobody wore stockings she and Gold Root could set up an open air ironing stand spraying water from their mouths onto the clothes they were pressing She remembered that those stalls had done very good business last summer because they charged much less than the regular laundry shops and nowadays every body had to economize

If all other schemes should fail they would have to resort to picking cigarette butts from off the street to be made into new cigarettes searching the garbage cans for marketable rubbish lingering by bridges to help to push carts up over the hump occasionally begging and even snatching foodstuffs from shoppers—which was not so serious an offense as snatching purses They might per suade Gold Root s cousin who worked as watchman to let them set up a mat tent in his alley It was a bearable existence so long as it was regarded as a temporary state Any moment their luck might change

Then she remembered what she had seen one day on [illegible]

up the vagrants Two policemen holding a man by the arms were hustling him along to a truck parked by the [illegible] ly and [illegible] little [illegible] kinny shoulders pushed up high their ragged captive was also smiling a bit sheepishly She watched him curiously

knowing that he must know that he would be sent to one of [illegible]

River there were women living in her alley whose hus bands were undergoing Reform through Labor

However here in her home village that was all very far away She returned to the house and stood the mirror up on its stand to comb her hair She looked at her shiny black hair cut to shoulder length and done up in a pompadour in front This small oval mirror she brought back with her had long been cracked right across the center and was held together by a strand of greasy red wool Ordinarily she did not mind it so much but today as she moved her face up and down to avoid that strand of wool she could not help feeling bitter Ever since she had come as a young bride into the house of T'an they had never possessed a single decent looking thing Now they had had a good mirror but Gold Root had given it away and she still had to go on using this cracked one

Sister in Law Gold Root somebody called from out side It was Sister in Law Gold Have Got peering in

Ai Sister in Law Gold Have Got come in and sit down

Where is Brother Gold Root?

Out in the hills cutting firewood

Decorously Sister in Law Gold Have Got stepped in side only when she heard that Gold Root was not at home

Combing your hair she said *Ai-yah* what a pity you cracked your mirror This reminded her of the other

one just as Moon Scent dreaded Her faded eyes spar kled as she bent forward and whispered *Ai you must go to Chou Village someday and see your mirror* Really beautiful Looking around cautiously she dropped her voice further The fact is if you ask me you people could have kept it for yourselves Nowadays who bothers about dowries when we cannot even fill our stomachs? Brides do not even ride in sedan chairs any more They all walk to the wedding Yes ten miles or twenty miles they all walk She laughed She had not been very fortu nate in her life but at least on this point she could feel smug—she had been borne here in a flowered sedan chair *Your Gold Flower also walked That is why I say the* times have changed Why bother about dowries?

Moon Scent smiled She knew that Sister in Law Gold Have Got was a simple soul and was truly indignant on her behalf Still she resented it very much—as if people all felt that Gold Root was more partial to his sister than to his wife

Sister in Law Gold Have Got —she said the name affectionately— indeed the times have changed But you see when our Gold Flower goes over there she is not the only daughter in law Those who came before her every one of them had a dowry If we sent her away without a dowry we might be able to say the times have changed but others would think differently Wouldn t that make things hard for her?

Sister in Law Gold Have Got nodded rapidly but ap- parently did not take in what had been said When Moon Scent finished speaking she leaned close and breathed into her ear Of course at the time you understand I had no right to speak being an outsider And you were not at home

Thoroughly annoyed Moon Scent spoke louder and with a sweeter smile 'It makes no difference, really whether I was at home or not I have always said to him I said, 'You only have this one sister Poor as we are when Sister marries it has to look proper Unfortunately it happens just now when it is a difficult time for all and we have nothing good to give her

Sister in Law Gold Have Got felt slightly stunned and hurt Nothing good to give her! One would think that the mirror was nothing of value from this woman s way of talking

Moon Scent asked her about this and that person in the village and they gossiped a little But the conversa tion soon languished And yet Sister in Law Gold Have Got made no move to leave Evidently she had something on her mind

The two old ones told me to come and ask you— she began haltingly her face reddening Since they are your elders they feel too embarrassed to open their mouths about this but—

They wanted to borrow money They had a good harvest but a great part of it was gone after they de livered the Public Grain There was only one tax nowa days this tax called the *kung liang* the Public Grain but it was very heavy And their silk cocoons and tea leaves had to be sold to the government at a ridiculously low price

And we have been unlucky with our ramie said Sister in Law Gold Have Got

She told Moon Scent how the old man had taken the ramie to town to sell it to the co-operative store He arrived early when the *kan pu* in charge was still in bed Annoyed at being disturbed the *kan pu* drowsily stuck

out a head from under the padded blanket to let the old man place a strand of ramie in his hand

Below grade he pronounced at once

The old man went home dejected Then another vil lager Li told him that the *kan pu* didn t know what he was talking about and sometimes when the rejected ramie was sent there again it was accepted and even graded *tung wai yi* first class above the normal grade

So again the old man carried the ramie to town in two big bundles dangling from his flat pole That day the co-operative was crowded with farmers all bringing their ramie and the *kan pu* were all extremely busy One of

the old man would not bring it back again they poured a bucket of red water over the white ramie It was the new regulation

The old man carried the stained dripping ramie out of the co-operative and sat down with his load by the bridge He sat there until nightfall and sighed loudly from time to time Then he saw Gold Root coming out of the co-operative a loaded flat pole on his shoulder Gold Root also had his ramie stained a bright red His face was red too When he came over to the bridge he threw his load angrily into the stream

'What are you doing? exclaimed the old man Not here anyway People will see you

One of the *kan pu* had followed him outside and was yelling at him 'What do you think you are doing! Who are you trying to frame?

I threw it away because the stuff is useless now shouted Gold Root I could have sold it to somebody

else if you don t want it But who can I sell it to now when you ve stained it red?

I know what you re up to! cried the *kan pu* 'You start a row and try to get the government to pay you is that it? I know you people! And you there old man He turned and yelled at Big Uncle 'Why are you still here? You ve been sitting here all day Who are you trying to frame? Such scoundrels all of you!

When Moon Scent heard the story she said Gold Root never told me about this

He was very angry at the time said Sister in Law Gold Have Got

Then she went on to tell about that time when every body made army shoes for the troops—every family had to turn in fifty or eighty pairs They worked at it day and night Sister in Law Gold Have Got said her fingers

make the soles out of

The *kan pu* visisted each family in turn spurring them

go far in those shoes thousands of li away to Korea where they are fighting the American devils If we don t drive the American imperialists back from the Yalu River they'll be here at our door And the first thing your land will be taken away from you

Stupid! Big Aunt had murmured when the *kan pu* was gone 'The American devils will never come to this

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borrow some rice Then she heard the folding doors creak in the courtyard and darted out to look

with the firewood He
wo enormous bundles
out in all directions

peared But all through the morning the people of the village came to greet Moon Scent at her house and every one of them tried to borrow money They asked for very little and they came without hope and left without rancor

Moon Scent grew frightened She told Gold Root 'You would think that I ve returned after making a for tune the way everybody comes to me for money

It has always been like this he said smiling and on the defensive as usual Anyone who comes back from the city everybody always thinks he s made a fortune

He wanted her to wash sufficient rice for them to have a meal of properly cooked rice for lunch

No we really shouldn t said Moon Scent 'There is so little left as it is It won t last us through spring if we don t watch out

It s only once in a while

But why today of all days? It s neither the New Year nor a festival and your birthday is past now she said half laughing She wanted to hear him say right out that this was her first day home and called for celebration

But he merely looked embarrassed and said stubbornly

No reason I haven t had solid rice for a long time and I feel like *having some*

At last she gave in But when she bent low into the great earthen jar to dip for rice her hand faltered She compromised by cooking a pot of thick rice gruel

Before they sat down to lunch Gold Root went to close the door If people see us eating like this they would have more reason for coming to borrow money

Close the door in broad daylight! she exclaimed 'What would people think? They would die laughing! Doors were never closed except at bedtime no matter how cold the weather

So Gold Root ate standing up near the open door listening to every sound outside He suddenly grew tense Clear it away quick he whispered Comrade Wong *is coming!*

Already somebody was calling heartily from outside in the unfamiliar accent of another dialect Is Gold Root there?

Thrusting his bowl into Moon Scent s hands Gold Root hurried out into the courtyard Moon Scent put both their bowls on the bed against the pillow where *the bed curtains hid them from view It being rice gruel* however thick she had to be careful not to upset the bowl and spill it Then she turned to Beckon to snatch the bowl from her hand But Beckon refused to let go and Moon Scent was afraid that the sticky gruel scald ing hot would spill on the child s hands By this time Gold Root had already walked in with Comrade *Wong*

Wong was a small man over forty but his lean face still looked young under his cap and he had an attractive smile His thickly wadded uniform made him look much

stouter than he was and with a tight waistband it gave him a bosom and a bustle.

W ll l S C

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They insisted that they had finished eating and Beckon timidly set her bowl down on the chair Wong grinned at her Finish your gruel before it gets cold Beckon Grown taller again He held her up high above his head Beckon continued to look glum though secretly she was thrilled

Please sit down Comrade Wong, Moon Scent said smiling Rushing to the stove she poured him a bowl of hot water No tea leaves even Drink a bowl of water Comrade Wong

Don t bother Sister in Law Gold Root Don t make me feel like I m an outsider Wong raised himself slightly in his chair in acknowledgment of the hot water Just came back last night? Must be tired after the journey

Moon Scent showed him her road chit

Hau hau! Good good said Wong as he read it Good good! Return to the Country to Produce—very good He drew up one leg and placed his foot on the bench peasant fashion Sister in Law Gold Root this time you came back you must have noticed that the country is different from before You know the poor have stood up Now the government is the people s own government All your own people Any opinion you ha e you can tell it to us Now don t be afraid—you kno v th people have turned over!

Then he praised Gold Root and said Now you h e come back—very good The two of you would co-operate

in Handling Production With production boosted up you would also Study Culture Right now in winter when there is not much work to be done everybody goes to Winter School We have Little Teachers who come here from the school in town to teach us Sister in Law Gold Root nowadays men and women are all the same you two should compete with each other Since he is a Labor Model you should be a Study Model They all laughed together

After a while Comrade Wong rose and left Gold Root and Moon Scent saw him out of the courtyard When they returned she said This Comrade Wong is really good He did not even touch the water Not like those officers in the old days always wanting this and that Once they stepped inside the door they wouldn t be satisfied unless you killed a chicken for their dinner

No stranger had ever spoken to her like that before so pleasantly taking such an earnest interest in her and as a person *instead* of as a *woman* She was very im pressed

Comrade Wong is a good man said Gold Root

But she noticed that he was miserable all day because that bowl of thick rice gruel had been seen by Wong

She explained to him that Beckon had held on to it and when she had tried to wrench it away she was nerv ous about spilling the hot gruel on the child s hand Then she lost her temper and said It is all your fault You insisted on putting in more rice

If you really listened to me and cooked solid rice it would have been all right—solid rice won t spill

All right blame it on me And she muttered It is you who want to eat And it is you who are afraid

I want to eat solid rice not this sticky mush

Don t eat it then Who s forcing you?
She slapped the cold gruel back to the pot and warmed it He finished his portion in silence
After lunch she went down to the stream to do some washing Squatting at the bottom of the stone steps she lifted her club and pounded the clothes Suddenly the hills on the opposite bank boomed out the sound of a colossal drum She remembered how startled she was when she first married into this village and came to wash clothes by the stream for the first time It was incredible to think that this slow Boom! Boom! was only an echo of her pounding clothes She always felt that something of great moment was happening on the other bank high up in the hills in the depth of the woods It was as if the [illegible]

Their apricot
-ons in the pale

green water
Ma! Grandmother has come! Beckon came running shouting from afar
She was planning to visit her mother tomorrow but apparently her mother had already heard of her return and could not wait to see her On the rowboat she had met two men from her native village They must have told her mother
She wrung her clothes dry and hurried home with Beckon
Gold Root was sitting with her mother keeping her company Moon Scent had never been a favorite with her mother But not having seen each other for some years they both felt a little sad when they met Her mother had aged They talked about the births deaths and marriages in the family and among relatives Her

mother spoke of a cousin who died of the sickness of vomiting blood It turned out that he had become ill from being strung up by the heels and beaten with a stick by the village cadres She got well started on the story before she checked herself Then she sighed and merely said Your Comrade Wong is good

After a while Gold Root went out into the courtyard and stood at the gate smoking his long pipe to leave them alone together as it was always assumed that a mother and daughter would have very private things to say to each other He was sure her mother would want to borrow money from her They were inside for a long time

When her mother left they walked her to the mouth of the village In this hilly country the temperature dropped sharply the moment the sun went down A cold wind breathed forth from the gray green bamboo forest Husband and wife stood holding Beckon by the hand watching the old woman disappear down the road Gold Root guessed that Moon Scent must have lent her mother all her money and she was not happy about it

5

Less than a week after she had walked up the path to greet her husband Moon Scent already felt completely settled down as if she had never been away

In the morning Gold Root worked in the courtyard splitting bamboos into halves then slicing them thin After this he rested for a while He dragged out two huge baskets from indoors fetched a chair and sat down facing the baskets smoking his long pipe They were handsome to look at made with split bamboos woven into a pattern of big white and pale green squares

Then squatting on the ground he passed the long lices of bamboo through the basket to make a handle

He grew hot from working so he removed his padded jacket and piled it on the chair

A younger cousin returning from the hills carried on his shoulder a bundle of quivering long bamboos eight or nine yards in length Coming into the courtyard he shed the bamboos on the ground with a tremendous crash Gold Root did not even look up

Moon Scent came out and sat under the eaves mending the jacket Gold Root had taken off They both sat facing the sun Gold Root more out in front The sun sailed slowly into the clouds and emerged as slowly The earth brightened and dulled many times But the husband and wife never once spoke to each other

With the warmth of the sun upon her Moon Scent felt itchy at the waist She lifted her jacket revealing a good deal of yellowish pale flesh She scratched the skin into a dull red flush then inspired by a sudden suspicion seized Gold Root's jacket She spread it out and looked it over carefully Nothing there Then turning one sleeve inside out she went on with her mending

When Gold Root finished the handle of a basket he would set one foot inside and try to lift it by the handle The handle remained firm Big Uncle hurried by with his hands inside his sleeves but seeing the new basket he stopped to set one foot inside and try the strength of the handle too Finding it satisfactory he walked away without a word Other kinsmen crossed the courtyard Every one of them paused to step on the basket and try the handle only to pass on without comment

Moon Scent brought out bowls and chopsticks and set them on the table in the open In the middle of the table she placed a bowl of blackish cubes of salted vegetables and on one side a tall wooden bucket holding the rice

gruel Beckon had appeared from nowhere to hang around the table

Hey come have your lunch Gold Root called out gaily to the child quite unnecessarily since his daughter had already fetched her own stool The first time he picked up some vegetable with his chopsticks he de posited it in her bowl

Moon Scent scarcely touched the vegetable It was unseemly for a woman to be too interested in tasty things But when Gold Root turned to refill his bowl she quickly took some of it twice

A yellow dog looking for nonexistent scraps under the table burrowed under Gold Root s chair The fluffy tail waved at Gold Root s rear exactly as if it were Gold Root s tail

Big Aunt passed by She craned her neck to have a good look at what they were eating Then she walked on without saying anything Recently there had been a cool ness between them because Big Aunt suspected proba bly justly that Sister in Law Gold Have Got was always complaining about her to Moon Scent about her injus tice her perpetual nagging

Way up high on the white wall there were little pic tures painted in black ink a spray of orchids enclosed in a fan-shaped border and a hexagon framing a sheathed rapier and a stringed instrument—things that were as far removed from their lives as the moon And the topmost picture faded by half a century of wind and rain was faint as a morning moon

Gold Root finished eating first He turned his chair around and deliberately it seemed sat with his back toward Moon Scent as he hunched forward smoking his long pipe

6

SISTER IN LAW GOLD HAVE GOT HUNG HER washing on the pock marked boundary stone a stone tablet with inscriptions on it standing about a foot above the ground outside the house The limp gray rags flapped a little in the breeze

Ai! Sister in Law Gold Have Got had your rice?

She was flustered when she looked up and saw it was Comrade Wong coming this way with a stranger also in uniform She was always nervous around Comrade Wong so that he too felt apprehensive never sure that she would say the right thing though it happened that she did this time

Ai she smiled and greeted him back you had your rice too Comrade Wong?

But he did not hear her He hastily covered up what ever it was that she said by calling out loudly 'Very good very good And is your father in law at home?

She made her exit hurriedly shouting Comrade Wong has come

Big Uncle and Big Aunt came out beaming Wong introduced to them the man in uniform he had brought with him 'This is Comrade Ku he said He has come from Shanghai to study conditions in the country He wants to lodge with you and live as you live

They greeted Comrade Ku effusively Ku was gaunt [illegible] made his [illegible] was a [illegible] Artistic Workers Association to Experience Life and collect ma terial for his next film

Comrade Small Chang the militiaman who served as Wong s orderly panted up from behind them carrying Ku s luggage on a flat pole Ku fought with him for the load trying to take it into the house himself but Com rade Small Chang refused to part with it It was his job to deliver the bedroll to the house and he was going to do it This man from the city Comrade Ku had wrestled him all the way trying to carry his own luggage In fact he had almost been tempted to tell this man with the glasses Please Comrade you stick to your own job and let me do mine

Like most villagers Big Uncle and Big Aunt had had intellectuals staying with them during the Land Reform so they took it with comparative calm They were careful not to apologize for the food or the living conditions or

to say 'Did the Comrade come down from Shanghai?' as that would imply that the country was lower than the city

They showed their guest the room where they kept the millstone and farming implements These could be cleared out and the door removed from its hinges and set up on two benches to make a bed at night Ku said it was fine Then they all returned to the main room and admired the dark blue vase the family had won in the lottery when the landlord s possessions were divided among them

At Comrade Wong s request someone ran to fetch Gold Root and his wife Gold Root was the Labor Model and his wife had only recently returned to the country to join in the productive work Ku was impressed these

Big Aunt

themselves

the coun

try of things are different now But Big Aunt cried out with gusto 'Without Chairman Mao we would never have this day And she always referred to him as Chairman Mao *t a lao jen chia* adding on the suffix 'big old man of the house which showed familiarity and affectionate respect as one might speak of an elder in one s own family

Ku could see that she was Comrade Wong s prize exhibit Probably that was why he made him board with her family When Comrade Wong was leaving, Ku walked him down the road and listened to him talk indulgently of the old woman One thing about her— she is very frank and outspoken

Comrade Wong had already mentioned the Winter School to him and suggested that he go to teach there

so as to mingle more with the people Now he said Have a good rest Comrade You must be tired after the journey Tomorrow I ll take you around to the school and introduce you to the class

Again he enlarged on the importance of teaching the villagers to read and write as a means of Elevating their Political Awareness To listen to him one would think that this job he was asking Ku to undertake working in shifts with the schoolboys from the village town to teach a few characters to illiterate peasants w s the greatest and most challenging work in the whole nation He was a good propagandist Ku thought Wong s party age was quite long and he had seen action in northern Kiangsu He certainly deserved a better post than the one he was holding Probably it was the infighting between cliques that had kept him down Perhaps Wong was a follower of some important personage who had been purged by Mao In that case he would be a dangerous character to associate with Ku became more wary and withdrawn in his manner

Comrade Wong walked back alone to his quarters in the Village Public Office which had formerly been the Temple of the Militant Sage It wasn t until after he left Ku that he realized he had talked rather a lot about [illegible] the Japanese [illegible] or him run [illegible] hadn t meant to bring up all this not to someo[illegible] meeting for the first time *Ing hsiung pu tao tang niun yung* Heroes do not boast of their past prowess It depressed him to think that he was behaving like a garrulous old man living on his memories

It was the hint of condescension in Ku s attitude to-

ward him that had egged him on He did not like the way Ku talked about national and world affairs for his information perhaps with the best of intentions assuming that he was totally ignorant of what was happening ou [illegible]

the [illegible]
and Artistic Workers Association that he was a new recruit to The Cause *after* the Liberation

After my twenty years of service to The Party always in the thick of the struggle Wong thought here I am playing host to this miserable turncoat and being patronized by him—the two faced chicken hearted intellectual—the running dog of the old regime

He shouldn t lose his temper like this he knew And he was probably being unfair to Ku The mood hung heavy over him He hoped that on returning to the temple he would find some peasants waiting in his office wanting to settle some dispute It might dispel the gloom He knew how to handle peasants and there was always pleasure in doing a thing well To the peasants he *was* the government They made him feel he was a vital cog in the machine instead of an outmoded tool tucked away in a dark corner

Usually he was kept busy from morning till night but it looked when he got back to the temple as if he was going to have this afternoon to himself After sitting at his desk for a while he got up and strolled outside his hands folded at his back Comrade Small Chang who kept house for him was sitting outside the door on a *pu tuan* the round cushion on which monks sat out their endless hours of meditation The monks of this temple had long been disbanded And Small Chang was

not meditating he was peeling garlic The *p u t uan* was very old the straw showed through the torn blue cloth

Small Chang had their washing hung up to dry on a string drawn across the intricately carved latticed win dow A patch of sunlight lay motionless on the dismal faded pink of the temple wall

It occurred to Wong that he seemed to be always living in temples in the semi darkness of vast empty halls still haunted by the evicted gods He was living in a temple when he married Shah Ming He knew what was coming—whenever he started remembering that was the part that came most readily to mind

He had first seen her in a mass meeting of *kan pu* when he was with the New Fourth Army in northern Kiansu All the *kan pu* gathered in a small town to *sheng ta ke* attend big class They made use of the house of an absentee landlord The great pillared hall was bleak and draughty like the outdoors on a dark day They sat on the stone paved floor during the lecture taking notes on paper pads balanced on their knees The lecture ended with the shouting of slogans as all their speeches in variably did Everybody stood up and repeated after the lecturer Long live Chairman Mao! and tossed his cap into the air hurling it as high as he could But not every body could manage to catch his own headgear when it came down There was a feverish scrambling for caps as the lecturer again shot up an arm with his voice strain ing f [illegible] Long live Ss Ta lin! he shrieked [illegible]

kan pu standing there cap in hand [illegible]

She had picked up the wrong cap She was very young Instead of cutting her hair short like the other women and letting it hang over her cheeks in greasy stringy locks she wore it in two braids tucked out of sight under her cap so that at first glance one would have taken her for a boy with her rather thin bloodless face and wide-set eyes But now with the cap off and the braids showing she looked very schoolgirlish fragile and a bit droopy in the uniform that was too large for her

Wong took off his frayed and battered cap It was so obviously his own that he had to dismiss the idea of going up to her and asking her if that was her cap he had picked up by mistake as some of the other men were doing None of them had her cap but on looking around they discovered a cap poised high above on a rafter A young man named Yu fetched a ladder with great alacrity and retrieved it for her He was standing there talking to her when Wong left the room Even the knowledge that Comrade Yu was low in rank and not qualified to marry was small comfort to Wong

'Who was that girl who lost her cap just now? he asked another *kan pu* somewhat peevishly Such a lot of fuss

I ve never seen her before A newcomer Why are you interested in her?

Don t talk nonsense

He tried somebody else later on 'That one with the pigtails—is her husband s name Chen?

I don t think she is married You mean Shah Ming don t you? She came here less than a year ago Works in the telegraph branch

I thought I knew her husband A Comrade Chen he mumbled 'I must be mistaken

The women *kan pu* were lodged for the night in the co-operative store He went there early next morning and asked for Comrade Shah Ming

As was the usual arrangement in Chinese shops there stood on each side of the room a row of carved blackwood chairs with small tables in between for receiving visitors and important customers He took a chair Red scrolls hung on the wall at the back congratulating the co-operative on its opening

A good omen thought Wong proposing to her in a co-operative store It ought to be the beginning of a lifetime of co-operation in our revolutionary work

The morning sun streamed in through the door lighting up the baskets of rice and red beans at his feet the mounds of dusty mushrooms and *mu ehr* a kind of fungus like furled black ears and the large brown peels of bamboo shoots with their dry sweetish smell The women *kan pu* chattered loudly at the counter rolling up their bedding They had slept on the counter during the night

Then he saw Shah Ming hurrying toward him Wong introduced himself I want to have a talk with you he said

She sat down smiling visibly bracing herself Afterward she told him that she had felt sure he had come to speak to her about her braids which had occasioned much criticism

I heard that you are not married Wong said Neither am I What do you say if we ask the organization for permission to marry?

Shah Ming took it very calmly he thought though of course she seemed a bit taken aback She answered smiling *Kao-lu k ao lu ba!* Let s think it over

As far as I am concerned there is no need to reconsider My mind is made up

Still she said smiling It is a grave step *Kao-liu kao liu ba!*

He did not press her for an immediate decision It [illegible] he had

young

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d fade

more

Two weeks later he visited her at her post She had to wake up a colleague on the night shift to do her work for her while she came out to talk to him

Let s send in the petition he suggested If either of us is unfit to marry you can depend on it that the organization will tell us so We can safely leave that to the organization

She kept putting him off with her *Kao-liu kao-liu ba!* But the second time he came to see her at her post she gave in and said reluctantly All right So they sent in the petition and were granted permission to marry One evening Wong dispatched an orderly to fetch her on horseback

The clockety-clock of the horse s hoofs sounded sharp and clear in the evening quiet He waited on the stone steps outside the temple until the sound had faded away in the distance then he went in The hall was dark except for the lamplight coming from his room He could just distinguish the blue faces and red faces of a row of minor gods down one side and their gilded draperies Gusts of wind made the tattered paper on the windows flap loudly He crossed the hall and went into the eastern chamber which was his room Today the

room had been swept and tidied up so that it looked very empty

The war years had been a period of compromise for The Party so the idols had been left intact in this temple they occupied and the nuns allowed to remain though the young ones had all run away An old nun who stayed on was doing her lessons at the back of the temple, beating a wooden *mu yu* It went on and on an even flow of toc toc toc toc, like water dripping from an ancient water clock marking time for a dead world

Wong felt the spell come over him as he paced about his room waiting for the girl She came that night and left at dawn on the same horse with the orderly holding the reins for her After that he sent for her every week Invariably she came at night and left at dawn like a ghost mistress in those old stories

At times he almost struggled against the spell He would have liked to think of her as a part of his everyday life like other men s wives The only time he ever felt really married to her was when there was an emergency meeting of the *kan pu* in the country town where he

on the platform was not just so But in this devastat u area there were no flowers to be had or flags and streamers and suitable lighting effects Wong had failed even to obtain a large portrait of Mao Tze tung which was essential

Shah Ming solved the problem by pasting a large sheet of red paper in the center of the wall with Long live

Chairman Mao written on it in big black characters Then she took two brass basins the kind that everybody used around here filled them with cooking oil and set them on the table one on each side During the meeting when the oil was lit it made a most impressive scene with the huge pulsating orange flames the light and shadows playing on the red paper in the background and all the *kan pu* holding up an arm swearing allegiance to The Party

Wong was immensely proud of his wife feeling just as if they had given a successful party Afterward he enjoyed talking over everything with her the mishaps as well as the amusing incidents It was wonderful when all the guests departed and she did not leave with them but stayed with him for the night

She told him how she had come to join the New Fourth Army During her senior year in high school she had been befriended by a woman teacher who was a Communist It was most exciting the whispered midnight talks the surreptitious reading of propaganda literature by the light of a candle behind the padded blanket The teacher told her Russia was the only country who really helped China to fight the Japanese invaders She kept her informed of the newest victories Yenan scored against the Japanese Shah Ming became a convert along with several other girls and the teacher took them with her when she escaped from the Japanese held areas into northern Kiangsu where the New Fourth Army operated

Shah Ming Bright Sand was a name she adopted after she came here It was mannish and smart, rather like a fashionable pen name or stage name

She told him about the last house they were stationed

in The four telegraphers one young man and three girls occupied the living room in a peasant s house At night they slept on the tables they worked at in the daytime There was no door—it had been cut up for firewood by marauding soldiers The north wind blew straight in making it extremely difficult to keep the oil lamp alight But even then it was warmer indoors than in the cow shed so the farmer always took his buffalo into the living room at night and tied it to the window frame Whenever the buffalo started to urinate one of the telegraphers on the night shift had to jump up from her seat dash over and set the pail under it then return to her work Again when it had finished one of them had to go over and remove the pail immediately otherwise the beast was sure to kick it over and flood the floor

In a way it was a blessing to have the buffalo in the room She could recall freezing nights when the three girls cuddled up to sleep under the buffalo s belly like calves

She told him all this a bit shamefacedly and together they laughed at her predicaments

It is a painful experience he admitted the petty bourgeois throwing himself into the furnace of revolu tion But this is how we are remade

He felt sorry for her but the most he allowed himself to say was You ll be able to stand it better if you have better health But don t worry your health will improve

In early summer she fell ill from a miscarriage and was laid on an unhinged door the only kind of stretcher available in the countryside and carried to the temple where there was a medical-aid station for wounded sol diers Wong was glad to have her with him though he had no time to nurse her They were suffering military

reverses and the day came when they had to evacuate the place in a hurry

The order came in the small hours before dawn throwing everybody into a frenzy of activity The soldiers had to return everything they borrowed from the peasants since their slogan was Not a needle not a thread from the people They could be heard everywhere noisily pounding on doors and shouting, *Ta niang! Ta niang!* Aunt! Aunt! An old peasant woman roused from her sleep would open the door fearfully The soldier would hand over a battered rice pot with a hole at the bottom or a broken chair and thank her for lending it to them for the past six months

'We are leaving now But don t worry *ta niang* he would say soothingly we are coming back

Wong had a million things to attend to Hurrying back to their quarters he found that Shah Ming had forced herself to sit up in bed and pack her belongings into a small bundle For a moment he felt distressed not knowing how to tell her that she was not going with him

Its going to be a rough trip He sat down on the bed and turned to face her his palms on his knees authoritatively It s better for your health if you don t come along I have arranged with Comrade Fang to have you stay with his parents for the time being Comrade Fang was his orderly Wong knew he could count on the loyalty of the parents so long as he had the son with him as hostage

She went on slowly with her packing though eventually she stopped and bent forward as if exhausted pressing her face against the bundle in her lap He knew she was crying

Its a very common thing he said Comrades often have to stay in enemy territory and go under cover

I want to come with you she sobbed

But there aren t enou,h stretchers he blurted out or stretcher bearers And we have to take all the wounded soldiers with us You can easily escape notice But what chance has a wounded man got?

He had his own packing to do Presently when he turned to her again he saw that she had stopped crying and had continued with her packing The cocks were crowing and the yellow light of the oil lamp grew bleak diluted by the gray daylight He felt as if they were catching an early train

Comrade Fangs father and brother came carrying an unhinged door They helped her onto it and covered her up with a padded blanket though it was June Sick people were always supposed to keep warm Wong bent down to tuck in the blanket around her neck and whispered You ll be all right But be careful all the same And get well quick We ll be back here soon She n dd

it d in anticipation of the troubles and danger thus thrust upon him The forced cheerfulness in his tone struck a chilly note in Wongs heart as he watched them carrying her across the rice paddies under the morning stars

The army moved to another district This was toward the end of the war when all sides had grown tired and cynical When any one side girded itself for a fresh effort and surged forward the other side simply surrendered *en masse* only to break away at the first opportunity The

situation became positively farcical with whole battalions
com

ider
in it
became apparent that Shah Ming had lost touch with the New Fourth Army Lots of things could have happened She might have been discovered or betrayed and she could have died from her illness or the lack of medical care

to stay with a relative of theirs in another village some

Finally Wong had an opportunity to go there himself to investigate Disguised as a small tradesman he went to the village indicated by the Fangs and asked for their relative known as Chow Pa kê Eighth Brother Chow

Chow Pa kê was a short little man around forty with protuberant eyes and closely shaved greenish scalp His head perfectly round to begin with somehow looked battered and out of shape And he was chinless out of self-defense so that nobody could deal him a knockout blow on the chin

Poised and well mannered in his long gown of blue

lumber and had been directed by the Fangs to ask for

information from Chow Pa kê since he was on the way here Chow turned out to be so eloquent that Wong thought his name Pa ke must be a nickname as *pa ke* is also Chinese for parakeet a kind of bird which could learn to talk with great facility and was known for its cleverness But in time Chow s wife appeared and was [illegible] So *Pa ke*

the meal

taxation

the various authorities along the way who had to be appeased and the soldiers he was likely to come across This was one of those unfortunate areas which were alternately raided by the Japanese the Communists the Peace Army of the puppet government and all sorts of nondescript troops who owed nominal allegiance to the government in Chungking

They had a few cups of wine together and Chow told him about that time the Japanese came down from Tungchow

'Walked right into the house he said 'The officer who headed the party asked me 'You are *lao-pai shing,* common civilian? And I said 'Yes So then he asked me 'You like Chinese soldiers or Japanese soldiers? I didn t know what was the best way to answer the question I didn t know whether he was Chinese or Japanese He was speaking Chinese all right

'But surely you can tell by the accent said Wong Then he remembered that, to the peasants soldiers all sounded alike just as outlandish whether it was a Japanese speaking Chinese or a Chinese northerner speaking Mandarin

Ai said Chow without pausing you can t tell by

the accent either The only way to tell is by their boots *Ai!* Quite different But I didn t dare look He made

Ai yah hsien hseng, mister! We *lao-pai shing* really have a hard life! Whenever we see soldiers whether they are Chinese or Japanese it s all the same to us All we want is some peace—it s best for everybody all round And he said You are right So then I knew he was a Japanese he concluded well pleased with himself

After lunch Wong got up to leave Having made sure that Wong
town and I
pressed his
a few days

Your generosity overwhelms me said Wong Though I ve already heard a lot about your hospitality That reminds me—I have a relative a young lady I heard she also lodged with you when she passed this place I forgot even to thank you

Which young lady? Chow asked after a slight pause

She was staying with the Fangs said Wong regarding him intently

Chow went quite blank You must be mistaken We didn t have any young lady visiting us

She could have disguised her age Well I ve always thought of her as being young Wong said laughing maybe because when I last saw her she was a mere chit

of a girl Actually she must be getting on Middle aged you might say

No Chow said no middle aged lady came to my house

I heard she has aged terribly with her illness She must look quite old

No old lady either Chow said firmly

Wong was well aware that the other s reticence might be due to the fear that he was an agent from any of the other sides on the track of a woman Communist So Wong did a reckless thing and revealed himself

Don t be afraid to speak the truth he said I represent the New Fourth Army You can safely tell me exactly what happened If you hide anything it is at your own peril

Chow was in a quandary The man pronounced himself a Communist but there was no telling which side he really belonged to This time it wouldn t help even to look at his boots as he wore none being in civilian clothes

Ch[illegible] o deny having

[illegible] Vhat have you done to her? Turned her over the gendarmes? pressed Wong

Lao-tien-yae Old Lord Heaven I know nothing about this! The Fangs are lying if that s what they said *Ai-yah* why do they do this to me?

You ve sent one of our people to her death and you ll pay for it said Wong

After a lot of threatening Chow finally broke down and admitted that he had given shelter to a girl who was

ill If in the end Wong turned out to be an agent from another side he could always say he had been forced to make up the story seeing that was the only way to get rid of the man

Where is she now? Wong asked

She left us in the eighth moon She said she was going to Chinkiang to get into a hospital She had relatives there she said

She went by herself?

She was much better when she left She said she could make the trip alone

— l d h — tion h h t was about all he ve him

Wong went back to his post reasonably happy But soon other doubts assailed him Why hadn t she com municated with him or any of their associates if she was in a city like Chinkiang where it was comparatively easy to make contacts?

Later there had been rumors of her being seen in Chinkiang As her defection from The Cause became — c me up in dis a pity her bourgeois ireliable I

He wondered for the first time whether she had been happy with him Since their union was not recognized by the outside world there was every possibility that she had married somebody else and settled down to the hum drum life of a small town housewife And Wong told himself that personal feelings aside he wished fervently that she would return to The Revolution for her own

sake In those times of stress the organization was not over particular Deserters were always taken back after the proper show of repentance

Wong was with the troops when they were marching into a town at nightfall The town had changed hands many times and had been the scene of many battles

up as he marched past a roofless house with eyeless black holes for windows It gave him quite a jolt to see a girl looking down at him from a window on the second floor He had no idea those houses were still habitable

Though the girl s face was little more than a white blur in the deepening dusk it could be seen that she was pretty and to his astonishment she seemed to be smiling at him He looked away thinking that he knew what kind of house this was but these sluts should have known that they couldn t do business with the New Fourth Army Then with a start he looked up again when an inner voice shouted Shah Ming! Why it s Shah Ming! But the face had vanished almost as if the sudden clamor within him had reached her ears and had frightened her away

Stepping out of the ranks he stood staring up at the window Was she avoiding him? But she was smiling at him just now She must be hurrying down the pitch black rickety staircase She would stumble and fall and break her neck He found a rectangular opening that had once been the door and stepped quickly inside

For a moment he felt confused not knowing what had happened A cool breeze fanned his cheeks Black

shapes loomed around him but there was a dim mauvish blue light overhead There seemed to be crickets singing squeakily underfoot He was standing outdoors The whole house had been blown up except the façade behind which there was nothing but rubble

His eyes sought the second story window where he had seen the girl the first window from the left—that would be the first window from the right in reverse It was merely a rectangular hole in the lonely white wall that stood jagged against the evening sky His scalp felt cold and tightly drawn as he looked into the dusky void of the window where the stars were beginning to appear

He could hear the rhythmical thud thud of the soldiers marching far down the empty street At the sound of those retreating footsteps Wong suddenly went wild with fear He tore into the street and ran all the way to catch up with them

While it had been a shattering experience it also filled him with a kind of elation He was convinced that she had appeared to him because she wanted him to know that she was dead She did not want him to think that she had been unfaithful to him

Then his training stepped in and told him that that was mere superstition And he was forced to the conclusion that on top of losing her he was losing his sanity

Years passed before he heard anything definite about her In the course of being shifted about after the Communist occupation of the whole of China he came across an old colleague who used to know them both The man told him that he had seen Shah Ming in Soochow She showed no recognition of him when they met so he did not greet her But later he had made inquiries and had learned that she was now married had two children and

another man s house

He had an opportunity to visit his home village for the first time in nineteen years His mother still lived but they no longer had anything in common All she had to tell him was endless tales of woe of losses and privations and all his assurances of better days to come failed to cheer her His family had previously made arrangements for his marriage taking the girl into their house when they were both children They worked her harder than a slave girl throughout the years and she had become quite a hag Wong did the right thing by her and married her But every time he went home for a visit which was very seldom he felt lonelier than ever

While he had no close friends he had always got on well enough with everybody with the exception of his superiors Consequently he was always the one who got criticized and blamed whenever anything went wrong During meetings even when he came out well in an argument the summing up by the presiding official would twist things to his disadvantage There was no promotion for him after the Communists took over the country Instead he was labeled unable to keep pace with changing situations Being a *kan pu* was a lifetime job however so like many other veteran *kan pu* he was pensioned off with a small post in the country

He had no quarrel with the over all policy of The Party He had been trained to accept it unquestioningly It was the small things that jarred him—the officials wives holding sinecures the importance of knowing the

right people of *chao kuan hsi* finding connections And he was appalled by what seemed to him to be rank extravagance like rebuilding the temples in all their

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He often got angry but his was the helpless fury of

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world

7

Teaching at the Winter School proved to be more strenuous than Ku expected The schoolhouse was five miles away and he was not used to walking Besides he was hungry Even when he had been there a week after puffing up the path against the choking north wind he felt so faint when he stood at the blackboard that he kept dropping the chalk

The food was shocking He came to the country grimly n en d fo nyth ng but this Various friends who had

ready bitten on Be sure to eat it up Again the farmers wife might wipe a chair with the same cloth she had just dried the babys bottom with and ask you to sit down You must not hesitate and hurt her feelings He did not find the farmers as naive as they were pictured And where were the sesame cakes? All they had here was a watery gruel with inch long sections of grass floating in it

Of course he could not speak to anybody about the matter and least of all to Comrade Wong So he had no means of finding out whether the situation was only local or spread over a large area He could find no mention in the newspapers of famine in this or any other part of the country He had a curious sensation of having dropped out of time and space living nowhere

The strange dull gnawing sense of hunger something new to him—a cross between toothache and heartache—made everything else seem unreal the sunny fields the woodcutters on the hillside the sound of distant gongs and cymbals in the wind—the people in the Rice-Sprout Song Corps had been called out to practice again and were dancing and wriggling under the eye of the cultural cadre

It was incredible how the people carried on as usual They cooked three times a day In the damp air the blue wood smoke hung around for a long time with its clean acrid fragrance At noon all over the countryside the black roofed white houses issued smoke from square holes in their walls Slowly it poured out like the soul leaving the body and melting away in a moment of holy ecstasy Watching it somehow Ku thought of an oft q ot d ng of Conf

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rice gruel he thought how can they go on like this when food is God to them?

He was afraid that he was losing weight That worried him most Everybody who participated in the Land Re form boasted of having grown fat after three months in the country Some claimed they had been cured of all kinds of illnesses of long standing To those who hung back from the dreaded ordeal they would say It is a hard life but you can grow fat if your Thought has already been Straightened Out On the other hand growing thin would indicate inner conflict resistance in the sub-conscious mind Ku wondered how he was going to face

anybody unless he wanted to run the risk of being ar rested as a Nationalist spy spreading malicious rumors

It would seem he told himself rather admiring his own sense of satire that in the matter of ill nourishment and long working hours The Party Comrades departed from their materialistic standpoint and became extreme

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in the Land Reform She wrote to all her friends giving glowing accounts of how her health improved under the trying circumstances She said she had served as an errand boy and trudged thirty miles on straw sandals in snow two feet deep to deliver a letter Now she could eat three huge bowls of rice every meal and had gained twenty pounds Three bowls of rice! Ku felt that he could do with three huge bowls of rice himself

He tried to work in spite of this craving obsession He was searching for story material that might be interpreted in such a way as to throw light on the flourishing and progressive state of the peasantry after the Land Reform In his heart he still maintained that the country must be prospering as a whole He found that a very useful phrase

He talked with various persons Comrade Wong accompanied him to some of the neighboring villages to visit the soldiers families The people were very pleasant but they never had much to say On the other hand there were quite a few who talked too much probably under the impression that he was some visiting dignitary who [illegible]

[illegible] missing them as not typ[illegible]

Comrade Wong would probably call Big Aunt typical But Comrade Wong had never lived with her and did not know her intoning of those set phrases could get to be very monotonous Sometimes Ku could almost believe that she was a shameless liar He interviewed Gold Root T an and his wife They both seemed shy but Ku still had hopes that when they grew more used to him they might open up

Gold Root took the Winter School seriously Moon Scent also went regularly because her husband seemed to like it She learned the tunes of some of the songs they taught there 'The East Is Red and Beat Down the American Wolves But she paid little attention to the lessons She was not interested in self improvement Like all women who are happy in their marriage she felt immensely complacent

Gold Root went and asked Ku to write out the characters for door table chair all those things around the house for him to cut out and paste on the actual object Everybody crowded around Ku s door to watch him wield the brush Moon Scent also came peering standing on tiptoe with an arm around the neck of Sister in Law Gold Have Got

Then she said Ai Sister in Law Gold Have Got with a teacher right in your house you should really be ashamed if you do not learn your lessons! She gave the older woman a push and ran away laughing

Sister in Law Gold Have Got blushed and smiled confusedly because nobody ever joked with her And Ku looked up at this with a smile Sometimes this pretty [illegible] ht [illegible] nd her She [illegible] by her stay [illegible] city She had come back in an [illegible] to the call of 'Return to the Land and he noticed that she seemed happier than most other people around here

One day when he returned from a stroll he saw her hanging up her washing on a tree There were some childrens underpants made of an old cotton print of a [illegible] on high branches [illegible] inter She [illegible] d himself wondering what she was like in summer without those wadded clothes that made every woman look pregnant The padded pants folded right over the stomach pushing the jacket well out

The winter is colder here than in Shanghai he said.

She agreed with him pleasantly He sat down on the boundary stone nearby and asked her where she used to

live when she was in Shanghai It turned out to be not far from his place She remarked that it was a conven ience to have the market only a few blocks away

She seemed singularly accessible today As they went on talking she asked him how many people there were in his family how many servants and if they had the house to themselves and whether they had many friends and relations in Shanghai With a shock he came to realize that she was working around to sounding him out on the possibility of his getting her a job in the city and also help her husband to find one if possible

After that he never approached her again

He wrote regularly to his wife and friends and walked thirty miles to the village town to post the letters After ward he would have lunch in a restaurant—rice or noodles with eggs meat bean-curd skin vegetables and bamboo shoots He looked forward to those trips with increasing impatience Then one day Comrade Wong dropped in to ask him if he had any letters to post Com rade Wong was going to town for a meeting and could mail them for him

He found himself trembling with anger So they [illegible] al in days [illegible] every pos [illegible] he was in town but Wong probably would not object to his eating a good meal out of his own pocket though he might despise him for it

No I don t have any letters to mail he said smiling Luckily the one he wrote last night had a book lying on top of it on the table to press down the flap of the en velope The glue never stuck since it went down in price to Face the Masses

It was crazy his telling a lie like that If Wong happened to take up that book and see the letter he would certainly think it held some secret Otherwise why should he be afraid to trust it to anybody else?

He must get Wong away from this room as soon as possible

'The New Year is coming you must be homesick Wong said jocularly slapping him on the back Miss your lover? He used the accepted Communist term for wife

Ku smiled Comrade Wong are you going home to see your lover during the New Year?

I have not been home for two years Wong said smiling You know how it is There never is time

Comrade Wong you are too ardent in serving the people And you are always so busy from morning till night I never have a chance to learn from you

'You are too modest. There is no need to be modest when you are among your own comrades

No but there are many things I want to consult you about If you are going to town this morning suppose I walk you to the Temple of the Earth God? We can talk on the way

Yes—in fact I should have started before now

Comrade Small Chang was waiting for Wong outside the house The local militia wore no uniform and for arms most of them had to make do with rods swords and lances But Small Chang carried a rifle They made an [illegible] with

[illegible] with

his story and observed as he had done on several previous occasions You should have been here during the

Land Reform Let me tell you—it was a truly inspiring experience

Ku resented having this thrown in his face all the time—that he did not volunteer his services during the Land Reform It had been a particularly severe winter and his wife had worried about his lungs Of course he knew exactly what Wong thought of him—a latecomer to the scene purely an opportunist

'Truly inspiring You should have seen the look of sheer joy in the farmers eyes when they had the land lord s farming implements divided among them Wong said

But that kind of joy is out of date now Ku said testily 'The *Literary Journal* had a special article about it last month It says writers are not to dwell on the happiness of the farmers after the Land Reform That must only be a passing phase It is time to move up a step

Wong listened carefully with the proper respect for the leading magazine of the nation Yes that is true he said guardedly 'There is still lots of work to be done

'The *Literary Journal* has lashed out at the present state of mind in the countryside It says the Turned Over Farmers think only of eating and drinking They have dreams of *sun changfa chia* Produce and Build up a Family Fortune Up north they made up a jingle which sums up their ideal

THIRTY ACRES AND A BUFFALO
A WIFE AND BABY AND A WARM BED

'Yes yes—they lacked Political Awareness Comrade Wong agreed

And if they own a pig they want to slaughter it and have a feast when their daughter marries Ku went on quoting

Wong nodded regretfully 'Yes the farmers are still backward Their Political Awareness needs Elevating They both fell into these familiar phrases without hesitation

How is your organization of Mutual Help Units getting on?

Oh our Harvesting Corps worked very well this autumn Wong said brightly And next spring we plan to turn the Harvesting Corps into Co-operative Units The union will be much closer You see all the buffaloes will be concentrated and redistributed to different units The men will go into the fields collectively at the toot of a whistle

Ku was not really interested in those first steps toward collectivization the painful process of weaning the peasant from the land he had just received He knew better than to tackle such a subject in his film There wa always the danger that he would over-emphasize the reluctance of the farmers to join such units and make it look as if they were antagonistic to the government That would be fatal

Though he was cheerful and fluent on the subject Wong was probably more worried than he would care to admit They had come to the mouth of the village when suddenly the stream shone bright ahead of them They walked on the bank of the stream and Wong sighed

It is not easy Comrade doing pol tical work he sa d How I envy you Literary and Artistic Workers In this great age there are so many stirring events crying to be

written about and told to the people All that was taboo under the reactionary government can now be told Everywhere you look you see a story

Ku agreed that this was indeed a great age

I used to write myself when I was young Wong said wistfully

Ku could imagine what kind of things Comrade Wong had written as a budding Communist for the school magazine But he listened politely to Wong telling him how he used to contribute to and then edited the local newspaper in a town in Kiangsi

In winter the water was shallow revealing piles of gray stones in the middle of the stream Ku thought it looked like a concrete road under repair

It was then that he got his great idea for the story of the dam Suppose that the stream overflowed every year flooding the fields and wiping out part of the crop Well let s make the engineer from the city and some old farmers put their heads together and solve the problem by building a dam with a door This would serve to illustrate the union of technical knowledge and peasant wisdom If the engineer thought it up all by himself he of course would be guilty of the Self-glorification of the Intellectual And if the old farmers refused to co-operate relying only on their past experiences they were guilty of Experiencism This idea would avoid both

There had been numerous films about the engineer and the old factory workers putting their heads together and working wonders They would repair a burst boiler prolong the life of an old worn-out lathe manufacture for a cotton mill an important spare part that was previously imported from America and could not be replaced But hitherto the situation had never been applied to the

farming population He had opened up a whole new vista

In his excitement he cast aside his usual reserve and asked Wong as soon as the latter came to a pause in his literary reminiscences Comrade Wong is there a dam anywhere near here?

A dam? Wong was taken aback his story about the newspaper choked off in midstream No But why? You want to see a dam? From the sudden interest that lit up his eyes and widened his smile Ku could see that he had become suspicious

No I was just thinking would it help to build a dam here if the stream overflows in summer and floods the fields?

It does not overflow

'But suppose it does Ku explained I was just thinking I might build up a story around that

'Yes but— Wong stared at him in amazement 'Why would you want to make one up when there is so much story material around in this great age? Besides—it does not overflow At last he had Ku sized up as that kind of writer He opened his mouth to laugh and checked himself just in time But a great flock of ducks suddenly burst into sight and floated downstream incredibly fast cackling madly with an elderly glee It was as if through a brilliant feat of ventriloquism his laughter was transplanted and borne swiftly downstream It left him and Ku both somewhat out of countenance

8

THE WEATHER WAS FAR TOO WARM FOR winter Probably it would rain A cloud of tiny winged insects whirled round and round a tree From where Moon Scent stood it looked as if the treetop were smoking

Som bod

gong from one end of

A meeting! Go to the

eeting! Everybody has to go!

Moon Scent had to take the child with her since there would be nobody at home Leading Beckon by the hand she went next door to pick up Sister in Law Gold Have Got Gold Root went by himself On such occasions the

men and women always went separately At the meeting they would also be grouped by themselves although there really was no segregation rule

The Village Public Office had formerly been the Temple of the Militant Sage Meetings took place in the great stone paved courtyard facing the main hall The

before he cleared his throat and started speaking

Moon Scent was not yet used to those meetings which seemed to take more of her time than they had in the city She was always the last to raise her hand when the time came for everybody to hold up his hand The women would titter a little while doing it and the men in almost equal shyness carefully kept their eyes front with a half smile and a look that said Maybe this is simply a ritual But silly as it seems it is the thing to do

Then Gold Root stood up at the back and said I move that we ask Comrade Wong to tell us his ideas The Chairman of the Farmers Association started to clap and after a while the people caught on and all joined in Moon Scent s heart beat fast Nobody clapped when others stood up to speak but as soon as Gold Root opened his mouth they all applauded But should she do the same? She would be the village laughingstock—a wife clapping at her own husband But on the other hand she was afraid to be the only dissenter She was still in the agony of indecision when the clapp ng stopped and Comrade Wong walked up the stone steps and addressed the crowd

He made a very long speech about Cultural Entertainment Activities more to impress Ku than for the edification of the villagers It was already getting dark when he introduced Ku to them and asked him to give a talk on the same subject The audience had stood on their feet so long by this time that even their arms ached from hanging down at their sides

Ku mercifully made his speech short After the meet [illegible] Dance of the Rice-Sprout [illegible] terns and torches cast a [illegible] The dancers banged the gongs and clashed their cymbals

CHONG! CHONG! CHI-CHONG CHI!
CHONG! CHONG! CHI-CHONG CHI!

The young men Gold Root among them bound yellow kerchiefs tight on their heads pulling up the corners of their eyes and eyebrows turning them into warlike and fearsome strangers They started dancing swinging their arms as they advanced and retreated The others looked on smiling But a heaving and pushing began among the spectators and more and more people were pushed out under protest, to join the row of dancers

A woman whose turn it was to be victimized dragged Moon Scent with her shouting 'You come too Sister in Law Gold Root Moon Scent giggled and put up a struggle but was finally induced to stand in line She had never danced and her ancestors had not danced for more than a thousand years in this part of the country She felt ridiculous even if she had seen schoolgirls and factory girls prancing the same dance on the street in Shanghai and conceded that it must be a stylish thing to do

Finally the torches were extinguished and the lanterns

walked off with their owners Everybody went home Moon Scent felt the sweat drip cold inside her wadded jacket and was so weak from fatigue and lack of supper that she felt lightheaded She had always liked crowds She walked beside Sister in Law Gold Have Got holding Beckon by the hand In the dark she could hear Gold Root s voice talking to other men some distance away It gave her a comforting and glad sense of possession to hear his voice even if she couldn t see him

The moon was behind the clouds Layers of clouds formed a rocky cave with an amber glow at the rim Then it started to drizzle The moon was still there a fairy light in the amber cave But before they reached home it was raining hard and they had to run for shelter

Gold Root had come back ahead of her The lamp still smoked a bit from just having been lit

'You could have helped me to carry Beckon Moon Scent complained Heavy as a big rock I m all out of breath

I did not see you

She had scarcely sat down when somebody was pound ing the door from outside

'Who is it? Gold Root went up to the door and shouted above the clatter of the rain on the roof

It was Sister in Law Gold Have Got coming to bor row a basin or an earthen jar 'The roof is leaking in Comrade Ku s room she said 'We don t have enough containers to hold the water All his things are getting wet

Moon Scent helped her to lug a b g earthen jar to her place and saw the state of confusion things were in Ku s belongings were all stacked in Big Aunt s room and the family were discussing sleeping arrangements Moon

Scent told Gold Root what was wrong when she came back and Gold Root went over to ask Comrade Ku to stay the night with them The old couple frowned and grinned at the same time trying not to look overjoyed

All right then Big Aunt said reluctantly He might stay with you for a few days while we repair our roof But we ll fix it as quickly as possible

But still Big Aunt dared not pass Ku on to her nephew without consulting Comrade Wong Big Uncle put on his hobnail boots and with his lantern and umbrella went out in the downpour to see Comrade Wong at his quarters in the temple Having obtained Wong s consent they started moving the luggage Moon Scent swept the room formerly occupied by Gold Flower Big Aunt helped to spread out Ku s bedding her widowed daughter in law being ineligible for such intimate service The whole family came over to see that he was well settled Ku was just as happy as they were at being moved and just as anxious not to show it Beckon circled around his possessions putting out her hand to touch everything She was bold because Ku had always been specially nice to her out of all the children

At last Big Uncle and Big Aunt got up to go with Sister in Law Gold Have Got holding their umbrella for them They cursed and laughed at the rain Already their voices w [illegible] dly with their gu [illegible] turn to [illegible] next room as if they had a sick man with them Now and then the child s voice piped up shrill and uninhibited

He sat on the bed facing the oil lamp and was suddenly filled with longing for his own home and wife He moved the tubular bamboo lampstand farther away

to make room on the table Then he spread out his letter paper and wrote to his wife He told her how he had moved house tonight to escape from the leaky roof how affectionate the farmers were how touching their concern He spoke of his work in the Winter School and reported the talk he gave this evening on Cultural Entertainment Activities

The wind was one long level howl on the horizon The bamboo partition rattled loudly In the other half of the room partitioned off Big Uncle s pig grunted uneasily because of the noise of the wind and rain and because it was not used to the lamplight that leaked through falling in long stripes across the floor

Ku stopped writing to warm his numb fingers at the small flame of the lamp The door creaked and the flame flickered He turned and saw Moon Scent come in smiling She was beautiful in the lamplight like the fairy mistress stepping out of a book for the scholar in an old story by P'u Sung ling

Not sleeping yet Comrade Ku? she said She brought a warming basket with live charcoal covered with ashes and tucked it into his bed Before it had always been Big Aunt who brought him the basket every night It was her idea at the beginning He protested to no avail and afterward learned to appreciate it as the nights were very chilly Big Aunt must have told Moon Scent just now that he required one every night He was angry with the old woman for being so damn solicitous Nobody around here ever made use of those baskets except the old and infirm He d d not mind it so much when Big Aunt brought it to his bed but with Moon Scent it was different It made him feel like such an old woman

This is not necessary Really! he murmured
She smiled at him No trouble at all And she was gone

The basket made a big ungainly hump at the foot of the bed He sat down disconsolately on the bed and turned to gaze at it He had never been so afraid of the

a strip of bamboo and the light went out altogether He could not find his matchbox in the dark It must have been put away somewhere when he was moving house

There was nothing left to do but to go to bed The rain drummed on Hunger kept him awake and the thought of Moon Scent bothered him What would she look like next summer when she could take off this ungainly padded uniform? He turned and tossed so much that he worried about upsetting the basket scorching his blanket and perhaps starting a fire

Toward dawn he made a resolution The next day when the rain had stopped he walked to town to mail his letter and eat in the restaurant as usual But before he came back he bought some provisions to take home with him—a thing he had never done before He got a quantity of dried dates and tea leaf eggs—eggs hard boiled with tea leaves and spices He felt very guilty about it since he was supposed to live with the farmers and eat what they ate

That night when he had eaten the eggs and the red dates he carefully wrapped up the shells and date seeds in a piece of paper In the morning he went out for a walk It was funny how the country was such a large disheveled sort of place and yet it was so difficult to dis

pose of garbage of this sort He had to go far out into the hills and scatter the scraps in the long grass

Moon Scent was washing his socks and handkerchiefs for him In late afternoon when they were dry she folded them up neatly and took them to his room perhaps meaning to stay and chat for a while She was not above flirting with this city man a little though she would never admit that to herself

It was already dark in his room but the lamp was not yet lit As she stood in the doorway she did not at first perceive that he was munching a tea leaf egg When she

with as natural an air as possible

At suppertime Ku brought the two remaining eggs to the table and with some awkwardness offered to share them with the family He bought them in town the other day and had forgotten all about them he said He put up such a poor performance that he was much vexed with himself But it was difficult to behave naturally about a thing like food when it aroused the lowest and most sav age instincts in all of them and had become the object of quite indecent cravings

Moon Scent made her refusal with a set smile Gold Root grabbed hold of his arms to ward off the eggs But finally they had to give in so as not to be rude Through out supper they talked even less than usual although Gold Root felt that he had to comment politely A good egg Yes—a good egg And afterward there was a per ceptible coldness in their attitude toward their guest

After that Moon Scent seldom came into Ku s room And whenever she did she always warned him of her

approach by talking loudly to someone else This assumption that he might be eating any time of the day was outrageous and somehow humiliating

Apparently Beckon had also been forbidden to enter
[illegible] him

scolding and chastisement and the child s crying

He made frequent trips to town now always on some pretext He brought home dates rock hard sesame cakes six inches in diameter and small sesame cakes called gold-coin cakes —he had eaten those before but had never noticed how terribly crunchy they were This furtive eating with his back to the door was he felt a degrading experience But it did quiet his hunger and mental turmoil so that he was able to get on with his writing

One afternoon he was sunning his back in the courtyard working on the story of the dam Moon Scent was sitting under the eaves doing her mending The child stood close by her side Ku was absorbed in his work and it was some time before he noticed the goings on over there The child her face set and stubborn was rubbing hard against her mother so hard that Moon Scent seemingly oblivious of her swayed and jolted a bit with her movements And the child mumbled under her breath and made small plaintive noises through her nose Now and then she gave a despairing tug to her mother s jacket

What are you whining at? Moon Scent suddenly exploded thrusting her off What is it you want from me you little pest? Every day like this whether there are people around or not Shameless! A born beggar! Every day—every day like this! I don t know what I owed you

in my last life Why don t you die? Why don t you die you worthless little pest!

The child burst out crying drawing her two sleeves alternately over her streaming eyes Moon Scent who never left off working at her mending went on saying the same things over and over again without looking at the child And then just when it appeared as if her anger was being gradually worked off a fresh spurt of rage took hold of her With a deliberate movement she put down her mending She was careful to stitch the needle on the cloth so as not to lose it The child knew what was com ing She ran around in circles wringing her hands gibber ing with terror Her wizened little face seemed strangely old and there was something primeval in her exagger ated theatrical exhibition of horror and distress Ku looked on aghast For a moment he even felt the impulse of instant flight as if he himself were faced with an enemy before whose might he was utterly powerless

Th hl f l D d L L lap

Ku came

fo it—that s enough! You can t expect the little girl to act like a grownup Now let her go!

She ignored him completely If anything his interven tion only served to goad her on When she finally finished with the child she returned to her mending Beckon stood blubbering in the middle of the courtyard

Wipe your nose shouted Moon Scent

she went to sleep when Moon Scent was sitting by the

side of the bed doing her sewing she felt a twinge of remorse

She suddenly said to Gold Root When the New Year comes we must buy some pork and cook something for Beckon

So she still had money left thought Gold Root She did not lend it all to her mother He despised himself for thinking that as if he was spying on her but he could not help it

Then she regretted what she had said and turned around to scan the face of the sleeping child If she heard me there would be no end of trouble She giggled with a guilty air But after a while she again said musingly All we need is a little pork fat With a little pork fat we can make rice flour balls with bean paste stuffing Children like sweet things

9

The Women s Association was going to hold a meeting As usual Moon Scent went next door to pick up Sister in Law Gold Have Got

She is washing clothes by the stream said Big Aunt

After Moon Scent left, Big Aunt grumbled after her 'If you want someone to go go yourself No you must drag others along Other people have work to do In this family the old ones are too old and the young ones too y[illegible] meet [illegible]

C[illegible]man of the Women s Association Y[illegible] so anxious dropping in at every house to drag other peo-

ple to the meeting Husband and wife—husband and wife certainly think alike So you are a Labor Model [illegible] higher [illegible] f praise [illegible] where is the nine *tan* of grain you reaped Where has it gone to? You end up just as empty bellied as we are

All right all right say no more! whispered Big Uncle

Ai the young people are such fools! Big Aunt sighed as she sat there plaiting flax They cannot hear a few kind words without wanting to lay down their lives for somebody They willingly dig out their hearts and dig out their livers I the old woman have lived longer than you people Just the salt I have eaten would make a bigger pile than all the rice you have put in your bellies The things I have seen are many One moment this army comes one moment that army comes After the army come the bandits And this time it is worse than any bandits You can t even bury four ounces of millet under ground and get away with it Yes they always know

Hai-yah Old Lord Heaven what kind of talk is this? cried Big Uncle Gone crazy today!

At this Big Aunt started to shout Don t be afraid old man! Don t be afraid! I won t get you involved Let them report me Let them gain credits No matter how anxious to please Comrade Wong—they still end up just as empty bellied as we are

Big Uncle finally gave up trying to stop her He knew that Gold Root was in the hills gathering firewood and that Comrade Ku had gone to town to buy the food he ate in secret They had seen Gold Root going out But it happened that he had returned without being seen and was in his room all this time

Moon Scent also had come back because she forgot to tell Gold Root to keep an eye on the child and see that she did not slip into Comrade Ku s room As soon as she ente d h
but
with
she
near the doorway in a gangling awkward pose

She jerked her head toward next door Quarreling with whom? she asked

He looked at her uncomprehendingly

Then she heard what Big Aunt was shouting Gold Root s face was harsh with pain She looked away from it quickly She hated that old woman for hurting him

Big Aunt don t talk so loudly! she shouted across the

Don t think I am afraid of being reported! Big Aunt shouted back An old woman like me is a candle in the wind and frost on the tiles—I cannot last long anyhow But you people who are young and have a future to think of—do not blacken your heart and do harm to others or you would not come to a good end

All right all right say one sentence less urged B g Uncle

Calling other people black hearted for no reason yelled Moon Scent An elder not behaving like an elder —living to a great age but all your days seem to have been lived out by a dog

'You dare scold me! Am I someone whom you might scold? her aunt cried out Crazy! Do you eat rice or do you eat dung?

Everybody say one sentence less pleaded Big U

Let it go at that said Gold Root to his wife
'The dead hag! hissed Moon Scent 'Why do you not die you dead hag?
Ah you women! Gold Root said disgustedly
Go and report me! Get my daughter in law to report me to the Women s Association! Go ahead!
'You never will stop—never will stop said Big Uncle between clenched teeth and there was a sound of scuffling and muffled blows
All right beat me! Beat me! wailed Big Aunt At my age with my grandsons so big already you still beat me? Beat me to death then! I don t want to live! I haven t the face to go on living
Things clattered to the ground as Big Aunt rolled all over the room howling with grief
Go and make peace between them said Gold Root to Moon Scent
I certainly am not going
Gold Root finally went himself All right all right Big Uncle He pulled the old man aside At your age, and married for so many years—people will laugh
Big Aunt sat on the ground boo-hooing Stray short hair white and tough like cats whiskers fell over her cheeks
Panting with his exertions Big Uncle turned a desperately beseeching face to Gold Root and tried to explain how this madness suddenly came over her and it really had nothing to do with Moon Scent Gold Root managed to shake him off When he came home the room was empty Moon Scent had gone to the meeting
From that day onward Big Aunt and Moon Scent ceased speaking to each other

10

Ku had been going to the Village Public Office every day the last few days to help write antithetical couplets for the Spring Scrolls to be sold to the farmers during the New Year Householders always bought a new set every year to paste on the folding doors Prices varied with the number of words In the old days the wording usually went like this

On this ground blessings abound and sons are born
Within this door gold piles up and jade accumulates

But now it was more likely to be

May Chairman Mao live to ten thousand years

May the Communist Party weather a thousand autumns

The characters were just as beautifully balanced and looked just as handsome as before in lustrous black on plain red or coral patterned paper But somehow it was not the same

It was on a cold dark snow brewing day that Gold Root s sister Gold Flower came home from Chou Village Ku was still home when she came so she and her family just sat around chatting without saying much As soon as Ku left she started telling her family about her troubles Her mother in law she said was more polite to her than to the others because she was a newcomer So her sisters in law could not stand it and banded up together to say bad things about her They said she was lazy and greedy and her husband starved himself to save his food for her Her mother in law believed this and got very angry and scolded the son It was all lies Gold Flower said though it was a fact that they all were not eating much

When Moon Scent returned from Shanghai and brought her back presents the towel and the scented soap it had caused a lot of comment Ever since then Gold Flowers new in laws had always been hinting that she should go back home and borrow money This time her mother in law openly asked her to do it saying that otherwise they could not possibly get through the New Year

Ai-yah said Moon Scent if I had only known how hard up we are in the country I would never have bought those things and made trouble for you

Gold Flower went on recounting her sufferings in a stolid monotone her eyes fixed on the ground and her hands tucked under her jacket The room was very cold

ter Come out and play Sister Gold Flower Gold Flower being much younger than he had no sense of time They played and played in the fields Then he heard his mother calling them Gold Root! Gold Flower! Come have your lunch! He was astonished They went home and he found she had boiled some beans which she had meant to keep for seeds The beans were very nice His mother sat watching them with a smile as they ate

Now he was fully grown and an owner of land and yet it seemed he was just as helpless as before against the force of circumstances His sister came to him weeping and he had to send her away empty handed

Sitting with knees wide apart he bent forward until he was almost doubled up one hand fumbling around with the back of h s neck When Gold Flower s long story was at an end Moon Scent rose and went over to the other side to prepare lunch

Then he also got up and walked over to Moon Scent who was taking rice out of the great earthen jar

I want to have a meal of properly cooked rice today instead of that watery stuff he said in a low voice I want it hard enough for the grains to be counted

All right Now go away It would look queer to Sister she mumbled under her breath without turning her head

When he came back to Gold Flower she had dried her tears and was playing with Becl on Leading the child by the hand she peeped into Ku s room

'Let me have a look at my old room she said

'You must not go inside said Beckon or Ma will beat you

'Why?

And you must not look in when the man is at home He will be eating and Ma would beat you

Beckon enjoyed romping around with her aunt Then it was time for lunch They had the same thin gruel as they had always with some stringy wild vegetables float ing in it Gold Root was so angry he could hardly get it down his throat He ate in silence then suddenly set down his bowl with a clatter and went outside the house to smoke his pipe

It began to snow At first the tiny flakes were only visi ble against the dark bulk of the hill Then they could be seen as myriads of grayish specks descending slowly from the white sky Gold Flower said she had to start back Moon Scent asked her to wait and see if the snow would stop but she seemed restless After a while she again stood up to go

Do not go Aunt Stay with us Beckon hung on to her

Moon Scent said jokingly If you don t let her go back home to your new uncle he ll come and beat you up

Gold Root took his huge orange oilpaper umbrella and thrust it into his sister s hand

But you might need it yourself Gold Flower pro tested not looking at him but at her sister in law

Moon Scent assured her they could easily drop in and fetch it someday when they passed by Chou Village They saw her out to the road the two women walking under the umbrella with Gold Root following a few steps behind But before they reached the mouth of the vil lage he turned back abruptly without a word of fare well

The snow soon turned into rain as it often did here south of the Yangtze Moon Scent came home alone without an umbrella She was wiping her clothes when Gold Root went at her

I told you not to give us that th n gruel for lunch I

would have thrown it in your face if Sister hadn t been here

We ate what we always ate Sister is no guest

She seldom ever comes and you even grudge her a full meal

If we cook something special for her she would think that is what we have every day She would think we are well off and yet we still won t lend her money

Gold Root said after pausing for reflection She would never think that of us

She is just a child Besides she would tell her hus band and the whole family would know You know how people talk

She need not tell anybody

I would have told you if it had been me!

He was silent after that

The room was dark and close in the rainy afternoon with a smell of wet cloth shoes Gold Root went and lay down on the bed After some time he sat up with a jerk, rolled up the old much patched wadded blanket slung it over one shoulder and started for the door

What are you doing? cried Moon Scent Where are you going?

I am going to pawn this and buy me a drink of wine

You are crazy! She clutched at the blanket with all her strength We would freeze to death in this weather

What do I care? This kind of life is not worth living

Who ever heard of anything like this—pawn the wad ded blanket in the middle of the nines! [1] We would die of cold!

I ll try and get into a game of dominoes with my win nings I can redeem it

[1] Th Chinese divid wi ter to nine times nin days.

No no! she gasped

She tugged and he tugged and she began to weep out of exasperation Suddenly he let go and turned away dis gusted She flopped down hard on the dirt floor Then she picked herself up and the blanket and still crying shook the dust off it

But what did he expect me to do? she thought Lend her money to help feed all her in laws while we starve to death?

She had to keep telling herself that to whet her anger p [illegible] is on her side [illegible] so depressed

[illegible] her supper she went to bed early [illegible] ng the blanket tightly around Beckon and herself Later when Gold Root came to bed and tried to pull the blanket loose she held on firmly and said You can do without the blanket You are not afraid of the cold

He gave the blanket such a jerk that it nearly landed her and the child on the floor Then to her surprise he blew out the lamp and lay down quietly with all his clothes on He did not seem to care one way or the other

He lay awake for a long time He wanted very much to take her in his arms and drown his sorrows in her in place of the drink that was denied him But he was deeply ashamed of himself And in China the commonest joke is that about the poor man who though starving is still amorous and is jeered at by his wife [illegible] he [illegible] k, sp [illegible] d [illegible] around her out of habit.

11

A RESOLUTION HAD BEEN PASSED BY THE [illegible] New [illegible] Families in the [illegible] Year and send [illegible] Each household would contribute half a pig and forty catties of New Year cakes All contributors were supposed to drape the presents with red and green streamers and deliver them at the proper doors with the Rice-Sprout Song Corps dancing and making music. A slip of red paper with the words Glorious Family written on it would be pasted over the doors of lucky families with sons in service amid the explosion of firecrackers

Households who owned no pig would pay money in

stead and everybody was asked to pay a certain sum for the firecrackers All contributions were to be delivered to the Village Public Office by the twenty fifth of the twelfth moon But the day passed without anybody mak ing a move. The farmers had unanimously raised their hands in favor of the proposition without quite knowing how they were to fulfill it. So each man waited to see what his neighbors were going to do about it

The Chairman of the Farmers Association and his wife who was the Chairman of the Womens Associa tion called meetings and talked to each family separately without getting any results Comrade Wong had to visit every house in turn to put pressure on the peasants At Gold Roots house he said Gold Root T'an you are a Labor Model and a Positive Element in the village You ought to set an example for others We must carry out this task It is really a political task with political signifi cance Doesn t that mean anything to you? The families of soldiers in the Peoples Liberation Army ought to be taken care of Without the Peoples Liberation Army how would you have got your land? In the old days the soldiers did nothing except bring trouble to the people Now it is different Now the army is the peoples own army And the people and the soldiers are supposed to be one family

Gold Root still argued that he could not produce the money or the rice for New Year cakes 'Why we have eaten rice gruel for the last two months he said [illegible] hurriedly cut in [illegible] f all their hard [illegible] ships and pr[illegible]

Every fam ly has its troubles Wong said smiling 'But look at the other villages They are no better off

than we are And yet they buy New Year presents for Soldiers Families just the same Are we any less patriotic than the others? He stepped one foot on the bench composing himself for a long cozy chat

When Gold Root insisted for a third time that he had neither rice nor money he said with a grin I know you are not having an easy time But at least it is not so bad with you people as with some of the others Your wife had been working in the city Both of you produce and you have very few people in your family You have al ways eaten better than the others for one thing

Gold Root flushed darkly Of course Comrade Wong was referring to that time when he caught them eating rice gruel thicker than what people usually had on Moon Scent s first day home Gold Root knew it was all his own fault which enraged him all the more and he lost control of himself Comrade Wong he shouted you ask around here! People will tell you what we eat every day—who can hide anything from anybody else? As it is our rice is running out Here the New Year is upon us and my heart feels as if it is being fried in oil

Moon Scent went frantic in her efforts to stop him But Comrade Wong kept a smile fixed on his face and continued to reason with him This th k nd of thing

s and

ng on

Gold Root insisted on his destitution And Wong not believing him harangued him on his duty to the Soldiers Families

Do not make your troubles look bigger than they are Look farther ahead Comrade he counseled

But how can we when we won t have anything to eat next spring? Are we going to have big pot rice ?

Comrade Wong was rattled for the first time at the mention of
agents had
the Comm
food stocks
had always dreaded the idea of a communal big pot 101 all By now though they had come to the state where they were fervently wishing for it thinking of it as a form of government relief

You people would fare much better if you stop dreaming about big pot rice and try to get more out of your own land snapped Comrade Wong With his smile gone it looked as if a regular feature were missing from his face It was frightening

Do not listen to him Comrade Wong babbled Moon Scent He is grouchy today because yesterday I kept him from pawning our wadded blanket and going on a spree

They both ignored her After the spring famine will come the summer famine! And then where will we be? yelled Gold Root

Wong pounded the table This attitude of yours is very wrong Gold Root T an I have been patient with you because of your past efforts But don t go too far What has come over you? Is anybody 'holding on to your hind legs?

He was of course referring to Moon Scent who had stolen away while they were talking She had fled to the dark recesses at the side of the bed from wh ch she presently emerged holding someth ng in her hand Flushed with inner struggle she approached Wong and said with a steady smile Comrade Wong, I have some money here which he knows nothing about It is all I have left

Please take it and buy firecrackers for us And we want to pay for half a pig to give as a present to the Soldiers Families I ve never told him I have this money

Comrade Wong went on pounding the table and [illegible]

you not say so before All this talk about being penniless —playing such a rascally trick with your own govern ment!

Yes I was wrong Comrade Wong But he really did not know I had the money He knew nothing

See that the New Year cakes are ready by the day after tomorrow—time is short And talk to him and straighten out his way of thinking His attitude today is very wrong

Moon Scent saw Comrade Wong out of the courtyard and waited respectfully in the doorway until he disappeared into another house Suddenly she felt her hair grabbed from behind Gold Root slapped her right and left and she kicked and fought back wildly She did not scream—in case Wong was not yet out of earshot

But Gold Root would not keep quiet So you have money! he said And you throw it about Who wants your stinking money? So you make me look like a liar! I ll teach you to make me out a liar!

In spite of herself she let out a yelp under the impact of the blows Big Uncle came and so did Big Aunt though she had not been on speaking terms with Moon Scent ever since they quarreled and the old man gave her a beating The old woman came to intervene because she was warmhearted and always on the spot whenever there

was trouble Besides it was pleasant to watch an adversary being humiliated even as she herself had been humiliated before all

Now now Gold Root, said Big Uncle There is nothing that cannot be talked over peaceably Gentlemen move their lips rascals move their hands

All right enough now Gold Root! Comrade Wong might hear you Big Aunt said tactlessly or perhaps on purpose

[illegible] Comrade Wong said Gold [illegible] and report to the [illegible]

The old couple finally managed to tear them apart and Gold Root stamped out of the courtyard

The one thing wrong with Gold Root is his temper said Big Aunt. That s what I have always said He should not have wasted his anger on his wife

Moon Scent said nothing When Big Aunt helped her into her room she threw herself face downward on the bed and abandoned herself to stifling sobs

Big Aunt sat down on the bed Fighting between married couples is a common thing Do not take him seriously Haven t you heard the saying Between husband and wife there is no grudge that lasts overnight? Then bending over Moon Scent she whispered You are not the only family who suffers With us it is worse Our pig is done for We cannot produce the money so we are told to borrow from relatives Doesn t your daugh[illegible] h[illegible]ve a sister who married a shopkeeper in [illegible] N[illegible]v she has [illegible] would [illegible] She [illegible]e skirt [illegible] sighed and bent do[illegible]n to wipe [illegible]

of her jacket At not easy!—to pass from one day to another

Moon Scent went on weeping convulsively To her the sky had blacked out and she was choked with earth and buried alive under a mountain because Gold Root did not understand her

On the following day they began at dawn to grind the rice into flour to make New Year cakes The creak of the old millstone was heavy and painfully slow It was the sound of the earth turning on its axis the passage of long months and years

In the evening they moved a table into the courtyard and placing a candle in the center of the table stood around it still making New Year cakes With both hands Gold Root deftly kneaded a big white ball of rice flour the size of a watermelon and burning hot Bending over the table he kept rolling it very fast with a curious little smile on his lips and the intense concentration of one who was fashioning something out of burning rock at the beginning of the world From time to time he would pluck off a small piece and toss it to Moon Scent who would press it into a small wooden mold then empty the mold by knocking it on the table A tiny brush made of five goose feathers tied together stood in a tin full of rouge water She would mark the cake three times with the brush making three red plum blossoms blurrily superimposed on the embossed design of orchids and plum blossoms Beckon noisily insisted that she could make those marks but the table was too high for her

At last the cakes were done and removed to the room where they were stacked up to dry There was a lot of counting to be done and calculating whether they came

up to the required weight In the deserted courtyard the candle still glowed at the center of the table which was bare except for the tin can in which a piece of cotton wool rouge was soaked in water

Moon Scent came over fished out the piece of dripping cotton wool and rubbed it at random over her cheeks and eyelids then smoothed over the redness with her palms

No sense in wasting it she said with a short laugh She called for the child and also applied it to her face For the rest of the evening the mother and daughter went about with their cheeks a flaming theatrical red It did look as if the New Year was here

12

EVEN BEFORE THE SUN WAS UP SOME OF THE pigs in the village had already gone to their deaths in honor of the Glorious Soldiers Families From a distance their shrill hoarse cries sounded like desperate long blasts on a rusty whistle

In midmorning Big Uncle turned his own pig loose in the compound—an unpaved sunken square in the middle of the village with stone steps leading up to the surrounding houses Long gray stains of various shades streaked the white walls of the houses—the cheerless water color done by rain

Don t kill the pig out there fussed Big Aunt Do it in our own courtyard Outside with lots of people watch

ing somebody might say something that is not auspicious Have to be careful with the New Year so near

It does not matter This time we are not doing it for ourselves Big Uncle said wearily If we do it properly we will have to light the incense and candles and then kill it since this is only a few days before the New Year

The pig had already been starved for a whole day to cleanse its stomach It nosed eagerly around on the bare pale brown earth of winter searching for edibles Suddenly it uttered a loud cry—one of Big Uncle s neighbors had grabbed it by its hind legs Somebody else came to help drag it and presently it was turned on its back lying on a raised wooden frame Big Aunt held its front and hind legs while Big Uncle bent down to reach for his knife from his basketful of instruments But first he removed his long pipe from his mouth and thrust it through the end of the basket handle The basket was beautiful with a surplus length of bamboo split which the weaver had not bothered to cut off and so it was left to sprout forth from one side with the long graceful sweep of an orchid leaf in a Chinese painting

The pig went right on calling out with undimin shed volume long after the pointed knife had been plunged into its throat And the sound never changed—always a flat expressionless grating cry uglier than the horses [illegible] bad luck when the pig [illegible] out [illegible] a low [illegible] people [illegible] grunt as if saying No use [illegible] And it became silent

White steam continued to issue from its snout The weather was very cold

The old man had wrapped flaxen bags on his legs to

keep warm A dog of the same shade of pale yellow as his leggings came and lapped up the blood that streamed down to the ground from the pig s throat Then it nosed around the place hoping to find more of it Liftin its head it happened to knock against the pig s leg stretched out stiffly in the air It smelled the leg curiously What ever conclusion it reached was obviously to its satisfac tion It trotted around ducking now and then under the pig s legs an unmistakably smiling expression in its shining black eyes

Sister in law Gold Have Got came with a flat pole on her shoulder carrying two buckets of hot water which she poured into a big wooden tub They lowered the pig into the tub forcibly pressing its head into the water When the head emerged again into view the black hair was all messed up and fluffy like that of a child taking a bath Big Uncle picked its ears with an ear spoon for the first time in its experience Then he shaved the body with a big razor that furled inward at both ends Big balls of hair fell off at each deft stroke Then digging a little pick into the hoof he removed the claws one by one with great ease The little snow white ankle ending in a tiny pink sole looked as if it belonged to a woman with bound feet where the toes were all bunched together

The old man had to blow from the hoof to inflate the pig That would make it easier to pluck off the hairs He had done this countless times in his life and yet he hesi tated a little as he always did before inserting the hoof into his mouth

A circle of spectators had collected around the scene The few comments they made were confined to estimates of how many catties this pig weighed as compared to the weight of some other family s pig killed yesterday and the

record making weight of another family s pig slaughtered last year

This pig is only fat in the front quarters said a tall cadaverous old man with square high shoulders wearing a long gray gown

Nobody said anything to that All their remarks were monologues

The tall old man went back to his own house and soon turned up again with a blue rimmed bowl and a pair of chopsticks and ate up his bowl of steaming gruel as he stood there looking on

Sister in Law Gold Have Got came with a kettle of boiling water and poured it on the pig Finally all the hairs were removed except for a patch on the head Made to sprawl over the side of the tub face downward the pig now looked alarmingly human the plump white form bald except for this black patch at the back of the head And when at last Big Uncle and B g Aunt hoisted the carcass around and the hairless porcine face came into view it was a laugh ng face the merry little eyes squeezed into curved slits

Later the carcass was brought indoors and laid on a table refrigerated by the ntense cold of the end of the Lunar Year The head had been cut off The b g white snout rested contentedly on the table Following trad tion —a trad tion that shov ed a somewhat grotesque sense of fun—they made the sla n p g hold its curly l ttle ta l in its mouth with a playful kittenish air

The r p gsty also served as a privy as was usual n the village Tall wooden pails stood precariously on the bor der of the p t in which the pig used to be kept In the afternoon when the old man went to empty the

pails he glanced briefly into the darkness The room seemed very silent without the familiar grunts and vague [illegible]

[illegible]

[illegible] he said aloud

'You have said that before said the old woman Seeing that he made no remark to that she added with a cruel insistence 'That was what you said the other time

'Whoever rears a pig again is the son of a bitch he said in a loud voice not looking at her

Sister in Law Gold Have Got had begun to cry Her hands being greasy she just raised a shoulder and wiped her eyes on the upper part of the sleeve Warm tears streamed down her face and the wind quickly fanned them cold

All three of them were thinking of the other time That was years ago during the Japanese occupation

The house they lived in had been built by the only branch of the family that had prospered and produced mandarins The dilapidated white mansion that now housed a clan of small farmers still proclaimed in a gilded signboard over the front gate Residence of a *Ching Sse* a *ching sse* being one who had passed the highest imperial examination The signboard had been removed after the Communists came but during the war it was still there

The innumerable courtyards were connected by stone

paved dark passages that were more like alleys though they were roofed in Hawkers were free to come and go through the house peddling their wares along those pas sages And a blind beggar might wander into the house his bamboo stick tapping a crisp clear tick tick on the stone pavement. This other time too it was near the end of the year like now The blind man had chanted loudly a jingle full of auspicious sayings wishing the house wives good luck in the coming year

EVERY STEP SAFE AND EVERY STEP A RAISE
FOR YOU LADIES WHO RE MAKING NEW YEAR CAKES

After him came a hawker of sesame oil with two earthen jars dangling from a flat pole on his shoulder calling out *Shiang yiu yao ba—shiang yiu*? Fragrant oil —want fragrant oil?

of the afternoon
Aunt
ding
hand
the

into the sunlight, smoothing the layer grindstone The golden corn flour descended in a sluggish stream a slow cascade of desert sand

She suddenly raised her head listening hard at a fa nt tap-tap along the passage It was not the blind man stick but leather soles striking against the stone pavement There were soldiers of the *Ho Ping Kuan* the Peace Army of the puppet go ernment stationed at the Temple of the Mil tant Sage and they often came into the village

Even as she was l sten ng somebody crashed through their back door that led into the passage and she heard loud excited vo ces in the room behind her

Let me stay here for a while gasped the hawker of sesame oil 'They are coming! I saw them coming!

No use your hiding here if they are coming this way said Big Uncle

Let me out then through the other door The hawker rushed into the courtyard banging his oil jars against the door

Careful careful! said Big Uncle

'They are coming! Big Aunt whispered stupidly to her husband Then she dashed out of the gate and stooped to pick up the balls of freshly made rice-flour noodles which were set out to dry in the sun like little

[illegible]

I know just where to hide it Big Aunt whispered excitedly 'Take it into the room

[illegible] g fat sow was a [illegible] in s arms as he [illegible] Got who was breast feeding a baby bustled in and passing the child to the old woman stooped down to lend a helping hand

Big Aunt stamped her feet at her daughter in law 'What are you doing here? Run off and hide yourself—hurry!

Ai quick quick! Hide yourself! With horror the old man looked up at her from the ground

Here you forgot the baby Big Aunt cried out with annoyance running after her daughter in law and thrusting the child into her arms

Seeing her reminded the old man of her husband Hey where is Gold Have Got? he shouted He mustn t be seen The soldiers will tie him up and take him away for a recruit!

Ai tell him to hide himself quick quavered the old woman Here let me have the baby stupid! You want him ... ?

he wall and went
The two of them managed to move the animal into their living quarters Even under those circumstances they felt a fleeting thrill of pride at the great weight it had achieved

The bed gasped Big Aunt Put it on the bed and cover it up

Grunting protests the sow was dumped on the bed and covered with an old padded blanket of bright red cotton with little white flowers The old woman drew the blanket over its head and tucked it in all round For the finishing touch she bent down and fished under the bed for a pair of shoes placing them in front of the bed

They could already hear voices at the gate

You didn t bolt the door did you? she asked anxiously No use bolting the door—it will only make them angry

The soldiers had already stomped in heralded by the agitated hen they were chasing

Hey nobody home? one of them shouted Everybody dead in this house?

The old couple hurried forth smiling welcome There were three of them all from the north speaking a dialect that was hard to grasp

Huh—pretending to be deaf they said impatiently Finally it was made clear that they were asking if there

louse The old woman started
Mean
ocked
d vid
with the scars of smal | ... the other side of the county A slip ual exploring over the other side of the county

of yellow paper pasted on a doorframe announced a recent death in the family Gold Root s mother had just died about a month ago The unpainted coffin was still in the room the body sealed inside waiting to be buried after the mourning was over The orphans Gold Root and Gold Flower happened to be out in the hills digging for bamboo shoots The pockmarked soldier walked into their room and saw the coffin Spitting on the ground to safeguard himself against the bad luck thus incurred he turned and went into the next room which was Big Uncle s pigsty

Hey old man where is your pig? he called out from inside.

I have sold it Captain said the old man

'Nonsense! How can the place be so filthy without a pig? said the soldier who had been a farmer before he joined up

'These country people are real scoundrels Full of lies said one of them who was much older than the rest hollow-cheeked and sallow with tired hooded eyes that had faded to a pale brown Turning those eyes on the old man he said loudly 'Where is the pig? Hrmph? This last was a savage grunt that seemed to come from a foreigner who did not speak the language He found that very effective sometimes

The old man quailed visibly but the old woman came to his aid all smiles Captain the pig has really been sold Not yet big enough to fetch a good price but we could not hold out any longer We need rice *Ai-yah* I cried when we took it to the market We country people

hen un

der each arm stepped up threateningly to the old man Speak up! he shouted lifting the butt of his rifle In stantly the air was loud with the flapping of wings and excited squawking One of the hens had escaped and had run indoors sailing over the high doorsill The ground was strewn with feathers

—its grandmother! cursed the young soldier laugh ing and chasing after it The hen flew on top of a table and bowls and bottles fell crashing to the floor

The others strolled in after him and stood around guf fawing, leaning on their rifles as he struggled with the hen

Twist its neck counseled the pockmarked one Make sure it is dead if you don t want your uniform dirtied by droppings

The veteran lifted the padded blue curtain at the door peering into the inner room The old woman immedi ately placed herself at his elbow pleading with a smile We have a sick person at home Captain That room is filthy Come and sit over here Captain sit over here

Ignoring her words the soldier walked in with the other two at his heels The old woman followed them into the room babbling Very sick High fever Mustn t be exposed to cold air It will be fatal to catch cold at this stage A fleeting glance at the bed reassured her that everything was just as she had left it.

The men walked around the room fingering this and that

Well look around look around the old woman said smiling helplessly There is noth ng to see in a poor man s house No sooner were the words out of her mouth when she was horrified to discover that the blanket had started to heave The pig was growing restive

Big Aunt went quickly to the head of the bed and clutched at the blanket drawing it firmly over the great snout coming out for air 'You fool you want to catch cold and die? she scolded Now be good Cover up your head and let yourself perspire all over so you will get well quick Have patience Don t you dare let the cold air touch you before the perspiration has dried thoroughly You hear?

She tucked the blanket tightly around it and surpris ingly enough the pig stopped moving

The veteran s experienced eyes swept over the room looking for signs of newly turned earth on the dirt floor or patches on the mud wall which spoke of hidden treas

[illegible] erest

[illegible] the

pockmarked one

Big Aunt s heart stood still as the veteran walked up to the bed He bent down and looked under the bed for trunks or suspicious patches on the earthen floor Then he straightened up and was turning to go when the shoes in front of the bed happened to catch his eyes They were homemade blue cloth shoes with a strap starting at the back of the ankle They must belong to a young woman —they were much too large for old women with bound feet

Big Aunt went all hollow inside with the feeling of imminent doom when she saw the sudden gleam come into his eyes

Hey Pockmark! he called out laughing we have a *hua ku niang* here a flowerlike maid!

The pockmarked one rushed to the bed and whisked

off the blanket After the first moment of incredulous
sil ce be l t f t y
they ever
th
hreatening
he in the butt of his rifle You t heat your
father eh? Tired of living aren t you?

The squealing pig had hurled itself on the ground and was making for the door In the act of grabbing its hind legs the young soldier had to let go of both his hens which circled around the room clucking frantically add ing to the furor

Come and help me somebody shouted the boy Don t just stand there Hey—block off the door!

Pockmark helped him to catch the pig Presently the boy found that he was carrying it on his back and it was too heavy for him As he staggered to his feet Pockmark jumped up and down laughing and slapping his thighs

Hey look look! he yelled Win Victory Li is com ing with his mother on his back!

Flushed with annoyance Win Victory Li loosened
back dropping
himself
veteran s

turn to catch the pig

Don t stand there pretending to be dead old woman he called out in exasperat on Get a rope and tie it up And sling it on a flat pol Otherwise how do you expect us to carry it? Such a filthy thing

The old couple found a rope and t ed up the pig Mean wh le Pockma k hav ng shaken off the young boy had p cked up one of the shoes in front of the bed

Wh re is this person? he asked the old

Now don t tell me those are your shoes One more lie out of you and I ll beat you to death

'Yes where is the *hua ku niang*? said the veteran with renewed interest

It s no *hua ku niang* it s only my daughter in law and she has gone home to see her mother in Peach Creek Village

Lying again! Pockmark slapped her hard on the face with the sole of the shoe He kept at it 'You old addled egg! Never a word of truth If your father doesn t beat you to death today I'll be surprised!

Don t be angry Captain the old woman called out smiling with one cheek red with the slapping But she is not here I cannot produce her like a magician Thunder strike me dead if I am not telling the truth!

I ll do it for him Pockmark promised grimly

Win Victory Li and the veteran turned on the old man Although they slapped him and waved their bayonets at his face he also stuck to the story that their daughter in law was visiting with her mother

Let s go and look for her ourselves said Pockmark

And if we find her here the veteran warned the old couple don t expect to live

The old man smiled and the old woman laughed protesting that they had nothing to worry about since it was a fact that their daughter in law was twenty *li* away in Peach Creek Village

All right then don t run away They made the old couple accompany them as they searched the house through deserted courtyards and rooms vacated n a hurry They came to a haystack The veteran bayonet into the hay making several stabs thought he heard a half-stifled moon

Ai the *hua ku niung* is here he said smiling

All [illegible] ab at it any more

T [illegible] t him! His heart is aching already because she is hurt Crazy about her sight unseen

Pockmark gave him a shove that nearly threw him off balance

Come out shouted the veteran Come out at once or we are going to shoot

The old couple watched in silence as a trouser leg emerged from the hay then another Their first feeling was of relief when they saw it was their son Gold Have Got who leaped to the ground

'Who is this? Pockmark cried out with disappointment

'Your son? asked the veteran

Yes Captain said the old woman

'Take him with us Win Victory Li said the veteran He can carry the pig

No no kindhearted Captains shouted Big Aunt He is the only son we have His father is eighty and I am eighty-one Who is going to see us off when we die if you take him away? She broke down crying falling to her knees and tugg ng at their legs and she turned to tell her husband to do the same Beg them They are kindhearted and generous They will take pity on us

Win Victory Li pointed his bayonet at Gold Have Got s back making h m march before him into the house to collect the p g Gold Have Got was of medium height and frail l ke h s father He stopped once stooping a little and laying a hand on his left shoulder where there was a spread ng red stain on his clothes

Pretending to be dead said Win Victory Li giving him a kick Let it go—we ll patch you up when we get back to camp

The old couple s last glimpse of their son was of his narrow back retreating down the road The pig its four feet all tied together dangled ball like from the flat pole on his shoulder The other end of the rope looped up his arm and was held by Win Victory Li In the light of the setting sun they could see even from a distance the bits of straw sticking to his clothes

Pockmark refused to leave until he had found the woman

She must be around somewhere he said

Come on! the veteran said If you don t hurry up nd trail along you have seen the last of that pig Once t gets to the barracks the sergeant will want his share he lieutenant will want his share the cook will keep the est portions for his cronies and his mistress You ll be ucky to get some of the blood to boil bean curd with

Pockmark grunted and they went off together

Two days after they had taken the pig and the son the platoon pulled out of the village before dawn Other units came and went And some of the men taken away by the soldiers managed to escape and found their way back to their home village Big Uncle s family hoped all the time that Gold Have Got would do the same Then one morning they heard the soldiers drilling in a clearing outside the village There came a pause in the drills and in the silence a broad long raucous howl broke out Several well-spaced howls with silence in between Afterward it was whispered in the village that those were deserters being punished by having their ears

cut off There were big splotches of blood in the clear ing

People could not help smiling as they passed the story around There was something funny in the idea of hav ing one s ears cut off But it was not funny to Big Uncle s family They could feel at once a whiff of cold wind blowing past their ears leaving two bleeding holes Big Aunt had a dream in which her son came home with his hands over his ears and she could not coax him to take off his hands and let her treat the wounds He had always been stubborn as a child And in her dream she was try ing hard to figure out a way of saving money to buy one of those fur caps with ear flaps on them as if that would solve his problem She cried and cried after she woke up

They had told the story to others but seldom in its entirety for fear that it would cast doubts on the chastity of their daughter in law People might have a sneaking suspicion that the soldiers did find her after all and that the family were just saying they never found her to sav face

As time went on and it became apparent that Gold Have Got was probably never coming l icl his mother became very touchy on the subject flying into a rage whenever anybody dared hint that he must l e dead n l another pig gone she

oou ii iuv

the wind

What are you weeping for all of a sudden? she de- manded With the New Year o near it is bad luck to have all this weeping in the house Your father in law and I are old but not dead yet Wait till we are dead then you can weep all you want

Pretendir at once Sister in law Gold Have Got took no
him a kick of her whatsoever and abandoned herself to her
back to c

The o length the old woman shouted in exasperation
narrow ... Even if he is not dead your weeping will be a
feet a ... to him and he will die You want him to die so
on ... can marry somebody else?
his ... Heartbroken at the injustice of the accusation Sister
of in Law Gold Have Got sobbed louder than ever

Suddenly the old woman also broke down and wept calling out, My hardhearted son! So many years and never even a letter home! The hardhearted child! If you don t come back soon you will never see me again How many more years can I wait for you?

All right say no more said the old man Comrade Ku is at home today he reminded her in a whisper

What are you afraid of? It was the *Ho Ping Kuan* who did this to us The *Ho Ping Kuan* dragged him off

Well lots of *Ho Ping Kuan* were taken into the Nationalist Army when the war ended If he is still alive

k *dumb* with fear

volutionist Family

But she soon rallied and said brazenly Who knows? He might have been captured by the Communists and

That will

alf a

Gone

crazy thinking of pork and New Year cakes

13

EARLY IN THE MORNING THE PIGS AND NEW Year cakes carried in baskets dangl ng from flat poles were sent off to the Village Public Office At home the house seemed empty and forlorn like after a daughter s wedding when the guests have gone and all the hustle and bustle come to noth ng Moon Scent found that she could not settle down to her daily chores She went next door to ask f B g Uncle had returned yet

He is not back yet ans vered B g Aunt And she leaned over to whisper I told him to smile nicely when they file in there with the r flat poles to hand over the presents If you g ve ungraciously you lose your things anyway and get criticized on top of it

I hope Gold Root remembers to smile Moon Scent said worriedly

They chatted while waiting for the men to return

I hope he didn t pawn his wadded jacket and go off to gamble said Moon Scent He s been feeling rest less lately Maybe I should go down to the teahouse and see if he is there

Don t go and look for him yourself If you catch him there he ll feel embarrassed in front of all those people and there ll be another quarrel Send Beckon

Moon Scent shouted for Beckon and looked for her all over the place but there was no trace of her

'The little imp said Moon Scent 'I saw her walking after her dad s load Must have followed those rice cakes all the way to the temple!

They were talking in the courtyard when Big Uncle scurried in excitedly

Close the door quick! he said Bolt it quick! Come on—hurry! Where are the children? All at home? You people go inside at once!

'Wh [illegible] Aunt

wh [illegible] or then turned and

Who?

'Where is Gold Root? Moon Scent cut in

Don t mention Gold Root to me! This Gold Root with his temper! I always said one day he would get into serious trouble Just now when the New Year cakes were being weighed Comrade Wong said that his con tribution was underweight so he started yelling The others were also at fault—they all took it up And they re all making a big row about it Luckily I got away fast Lost my flat pole and baskets though

Moon Scent felt sick Big Uncle have you seen Beckon?

Big Uncle froze and then suddenly pointed a finger at her Hey hurry up! Go and get her Followed her pa all the way to the temple

Then he complained fretfully of the necessity of un bolting the door now to let her out and then unbolting it a ain when she came back

Moon Scent ran as fast as she could toward the tem ple Her heart was curiously light and blank an empty thing suspended in mid air From afar she could see the pink walls and hear the faint hubbub of shouting She ran straight into the temple gate The sun shone bright in the huge courtyard which was quite empty Spar rows twittered under the eaves But suddenly a m l tia man dashed out of the eastern wing with an arm out stretched holding an archaic lance the tuft of red hair under the blade fluffed out by the wind It was a dream like fantastic sight hauled down off the stage and thrust into the noonday sun Moon Scent stood rooted to the spot while he charged past her and disappeared through the gate

She padded up the stone steps and peered into the high-ceilinged gloom of the ma n hall There was no-
h d h n She turned and ran out of the temple
h m of the crowd
nber Company
ow the govern
uting Beckon!
ment storehouse She ru
Beckon!

The lumber company v as a low building and once its name had been vritt n in big black characters e ght or nine feet high on the wh te wall After the government

took over the characters had been washed off leaving big gray blotches A dense crowd swarmed black against its door

Beckon come home! Come home Beckon s dad! she cried

Two militiamen brandishing red tufted lances at the edge of the crowd also shouted Go home! All right now—everybody go home!

We want to borrow some rice for the New Year! someone called out

A good harvest and spend the New Year empty bellied!

[illegible]

own grain!

uld not tell which was her husband s A strange excitement flooded over her that almost drowned out her anxiety and she was ashamed to call out Go home Beckon s dad

Kinsmen Comrade Wong s voice rose above the din whatever you have to say we can talk it over Whatever problems you have we can settle it together Everybody go home first and I guarantee— The rest of his words were lost in the banging of carrying poles against the door

A child whimpered in fear and Moon Scent shrieked Beckon! Beckon! as she pushed into the heart of the crowd

M ma! M ma! yelled Beckon

The militiamen began to thrust out tentatively with their lances and rods and someplace a man cried out in pain and swore *Damn his mother! Somebody ll get killed!* as if surprised at the idea

The carrying-poles continued to ram against the door It creaked and then gave way with a crash

"Kinsmen! Everybody keep cool. This is the People's Property! The People's Property cannot be touched!" Wong shouted hoarsely "Let us all protect the People's Property!"

A carrying pole struck him at the back of his head Then the three militiamen who carried rifles pointed their guns at the crowd One of the T'an brothers grabbed for one of the guns and the militiaman who held it shot him in the stomach The other militiamen fired and the crowd was stunned into silence Then the militiamen backed up working the bolts of their rifles to reload and the mob growled and surged toward them

Go up on the roof you fools yelled Wong who had some experience in guerrilla warfare Shoot from the rooftop

M'ma! M'ma! Beckon went on screaming flatly with never the slightest variation in tone

Beckon! Beckon! She was not far off but Moon Scent could not move an inch toward her jammed tight in the stampede In that nightmarish moment it was as if they had been calling to each other throughout eternity

Comrade Wong grabbed Small Chang's gun from his terrified orderly and holding the gun at his hip fired blindly into the peasants pushing in past the shattered door He reloaded rapidly and fired again Desperately he charged into the opening his shooting had created Hands clutched at his clothes but he swung the rifle back and forth and broke free Badly bruised his face

doubly pale with the blood on it his clothes torn and his cap lost he ran to his quarters in the western wing of the temple Ku was in his room He had been working on a Glorious Family poster when the riot broke out Now he stood behind the table looking trapped

Where did they get the guns? he quavered

Wong made no reply as he slumped into a chair his rifle across his knees and his chin embedded in the greasy full bosom of his uniform

Are you hurt Comrade? Ku asked with belated solicitude

I m all right Wong answered dully

They have guns Ku whispered

That was our militia defending the storehouse Wong said stiffly

Oh Ku said in some confusion

The distant hubbub had died down but they could still hear scattered shots banging away Wong drew the towel from the back of his waistband and wiped the sweat from his face and neck

We have failed Wong said heavily and then again as if saying it for the first time We have failed We have had to shoot at our people

Ku avoided looking at him In his present overwrought state Wong probably did not realize that this admission of failure in a moment of weakness and lack of faith amounted to a virtual betrayal of The Party and could be brought up against him in any purge But sooner or later it would occur to him And it would be only natural if he should want to dispose of the sole witness of his crime Humble as his rank might be within this village his power was absolute And what was one more cas ualty amid all this shooting?

Wong stood up abruptly and Ku jumped as the rifle in his lap fell clattering to the ground

There must be spies behind this Wong said He turned an excited animated face and unseeing eyes toward Ku 'There must be Otherwise the people would never rise up like this We ll have to get to the bottom of this

14

ON THEIR WAY TO TOWN TO REPORT TO THE district headquarters the militiamen stopped at Chou Village with a message for the *kan pu* Then the *kan pu* went round the village telling everybody to *ti kao chin ti* heighten their vigilance and report at once if they saw any suspicious characters around A number of *fan kê min* anti revolutionists had escaped and might have come in this direction

That was all he said but soon the word leaked out that there had been a disturbance over at T'an Village Gold Flower felt concerned at the news She wondered what had happened and if any of her folks were affected

At twilight she went out to fetch water Balancing

the flat pole on her shoulder she walked absently down the flight of stone steps that led to the stream her eyes fixed all the while on the opposite bank where her native village lay With a slight tilt of one shoulder she lowered a pail into the stream and with a quiet twist of her body hoisted it back up again full The darkening sky closed softly upon the darker hills and groves Only the water was pale and bright a broad band of shimmering gray

A pebble hit her on the back

Little devil she muttered without turning In the village she was still referred to as The Bride and chil dren often followed her about teasing her

Another stone glancing off her shoulder fell splash ing into the stream The other pail filled she sl pped the pole off her shoulders and turned hands on h ps to face the offender There was nobody in sight

Sister! Sister Gold Flower! someone called softly

She jerked up her head In no time she was up the slope with the help of the flat pole In the bamboo grove she stood face to face with her sister n law who looked like a ghost clad only in a white shirt on top of her padded pants with her hair d sheveled and fuzzed out from her face

What s happened? stammered Gold Flower

When Moon Scent started to speak her teeth chat tered so much from the cold that she began to stammer too which annoyed her because it made her seem so frightened

Where is your padded jacket? asked Gold Flower

Gold Root has it He is weak from bleeding so I made him put it over h s shoulders

What s happened to him? cried Gold Flower

He s all right, said Moon Scent strangely de

They started shooting and he is hurt in the leg It could have been much worse

'Where is he now?

Farther up in the hill

'Take me to see him

Moon Scent hesitated 'You can t leave those pails down there What if somebody comes and sees them?

But why did they shoot at him? pressed Gold Flower

'There was some trouble at the warehouse People in the village wanted to borrow some rice for the New Year And they started shooting She added quickly almost lightly looking at Gold Flower with a bright expression Beckon is dead Trampled to death

'What? Gold Flower said in an uncertain voice

'We didn t believe it either We took her with us all the way up the hill But she is dead

She told her about the shooting and how as soon as he struggled free from the pressure of the stampeding mob she had turned back toward the storehouse to look for Beckon As she fought through the oncoming crowd knocked off balance again and again somebody seized her by the wrist and dragged her off in a fast run It was Gold Root with Beckon slung over one shoulder As they sped through the crackle of shots and bullets whining shrilly past them she was conscious of her body as never before feeling naked and vulnerable all over But it could not be really serious she felt when they were running hand in hand like children in a game

When he fell face downward she thought at first it was to take cover Then when she realized that he was wounded she took Beckon s little body away from him and helped him up making him lean on her 'We are almost home she had said encouragingly

"No we are not going home he had said 'We can t go home We ll go somewhere else and hide for a few days wait till the thing blows over

She thought of going to her mother s place but that was too far he wouldn t be able to make it So they decided on Chou Village They took a short cut through the hills because there was less chance of being seen

It was one of those cold sunless afternoons when the trees on the hill stood straight with their long white toes set wide apart on the ground as if they were about to step down the hillside and walk right into the village because it was too dreary up there The hills rose in tiers like steps cut out for their use Moon Scent labored over those steps that were too high for men dragging Gold Root after her She had known for a long tim that the limp crushed child in her arms was dead In the end sheer exhaustion forced her to abandon her and there was no time for grief They hid the small corpse at the base of one of the trees hoping that no one would find it until they were farther away

It was not till the end of the journey when they had to cross the bridge that she was truly afra d It was nearing twilight The narrow footbr dge stood on high stilts black gainst the silvery pallor of the stream In winter when the water was low the wobbly stilts rose to about th rty feet above water Somehow she maneu vered Gold Root s unpredictably lurching weight across the twin l ne of long boards that felt soft and yielding under the feet It felt awful to be cushioned all round with the infin te softness of empty air And the broad expanse of water underneath was pale and withdrawn falling far away from them

She was glad now to have somebody to tell it to all

the extraordinary things that happened during the day But when she had finished her story she could see that Gold Flower did not really understand in spite of the dutifully assumed expression of shock and indignation on her face The experience stood between them like a wall They looked dumbly into each other s gray faces in the growing darkness with the icy breath of the whispering bamboos blowing down their necks

So it s you people they are after Gold Flower said in sudden realization Her voice dropped to a whisper They said *fan kê-min*

Fan kê-min! exclaimed Moon Scent How can we be *fan kê-min?* But even as she protested she began to feel uncertain about the meaning of reactionary which had not been clear to her to begin with

We ll have to go away from here We ll go to Shanghai In Shanghai we can hide she said with a note of finality But not just now—he can t even walk He ll have to stay in your house for a few days

Gold Flower s front teeth glistened faintly between parted lips in the dark With an effort she closed her mouth to swallow But where can we hide him? My sisters in law and their children they are all over the place"

There must be some way to keep them out of your room

Not the children They re running in and out all the time

Moon Scent became silent but not for long I know she said You can say you ve had a miscarriage and they will say your room is unclean and they won t come near it for months And depend on them they ll keep the children away

But they know I m not pregnant

You were too shy to tell anybody said Moon Scent

Gold Flower could see that it was a workable scheme There seemed to be no way out This terrible thing that had happened was now intruding on her everyday world She had duties there She took it seriously her new status as wife and daughter in law She had to be careful with everything she did or she would not be able to hold up her head in front of the ever watchful enemies who were her sisters in law She had left childhood far behind And so had her brother judging from the way he behaved that day when she came home to borrow money He had outgrown his attachment to her

She thought of many things as she slid a hand heavily up and down the long green arm of a bamboo All she felt was its cold smooth length and the knots that were loop bracelets on the arm

Sister Gold Flower Moon Scent said gently reaching for her hand I know it s hard for you But your brother will die of cold if he stays outdoors all night He ll die

But don t you see it s dangerous for him to come into the village said Gold Flower flushed and resentful There s sure to be watchers

It s dark now He ll lean on you and you can pretend it s Brother in Law coming home drunk

Gold Flo er stiffened at the mention of her husband No use saying it s h m she said in a hard voice He s been home all day Everybody knows

Get him to come and fetch your brother then Yes it s better that he comes instead of you The dogs know him well and they on t bark so much Tell him to bring a padded blanket Co er up your brother fro n head to

foot and say it's you He has just fished you out of the stream You have jumped in because you heard your family were all killed in the riot

Gold Flower just stared at her dismally not saying anything

Yes that's much better Moon Scent said upon reflection Nobody will fiddle with the blanket when it's supposed to be a young woman inside Otherwise they might want to have a look

There was a short silence before Gold Flower said No it won't do He is sure to tell his mother

No you mustn't let him tell anybody

I can't stop him He'll be afraid They will take him for a *fan ke-min* if he is caught she said miserably

Moon Scent gave her a little push and whispered

[illegible] A ...de

[illegible] ly

[illegible] ...ike

her do this to her own husband—virtually luring him to his death Did Moon Scent realize at all what she was asking of her? Perhaps she did not know what it was like *to love one's husband That Moon Scent had always been*

[illegible]

[illegible] asked her to do

[illegible] The memory of how good he had been to her suddenly flooded over her And she remembered all that they had meant to each other throughout the years *She felt desolate as if they were again left with nobody to turn to except each other*

There was no helping it—she had to do all she could for him She jerked her hand away from Moon Scent's grasp and quickly turned to go saying You wait here

Moon Scent came a step after her then stopped
Sister Gold Flower she said nervously

Gold Flower flushed with shame at the thought that Moon Scent must think she was running away Don t worry she said without turning I won t be long

Remember to have Brother in Law bring a padded blanket said Moon Scent Here you forgot your flat pole She hurried after her bending down the slope to pass her the flat pole

I was only afraid for Brother Gold Flower said in a low voice not looking at her

After she was gone Moon Scent retreated to an upper ledge where the brush was denser She was not at all sure of Gold Flower Now he ll find out—he who is so fond of his sister she thought bitterly He ll see that the old saying is right A daughter married off is water poured off—and she won t come back She m ght come home weeping and complain about her in laws But in times like this she thinks first about her husband s family

She wondered if they should have risked the dogs and sneaked into the village by themselves Once Gold Root was inside the house they would ha e more of a hold over the Chous The Chous would realize that they were involved already and they would have to help keep the secret out of fear

She hugged herself t ght n the icy wind Myriads of tongue like bamboo leaves ere making that dry eerie hush hush no se that was the most ch ll ng sound on earth It was hard to stand st ll in th s cold but she was afraid to walk about or stamp her feet to keep warm

Lights dotted the village On the other side the vast gray pla n lay stretched out in the evening haze Its

silence was full of small muffled rustlings like the sound of a man sniffing and turning inside a padded blanket kept awake by the cold

The first time Moon Scent ever came to this village was when the match was being made between Gold Flower and the Chou boy The Chous had taken special notice of Gold Flower in the crowd during the annual parade of the gods But the T ans had never seen the boy and it was arranged that they should come to Chou Village one day while he was at work in the fields They took Gold Flower along and urged her to have a good look but she had perversely turned her head away when they passed the rice paddies And yet later during dis cussions when somebody remarked on the boy s good looks she had said scornfully Looks so sissy with the earrings It was a standing joke in the family how she could have seen without looking The Chou boy s parents had been afraid to lose him as a baby so they had had his ears pierced and made him wear silver earrings like a girl to deceive the jealous gods

They had come to Chou Village that day on the pre text of going to town to sell their lamb and chickens at the fair To increase its weight the lamb had been stuffed with food before they set out Its incredibly swollen belly hard as a big ball of rock hung low and swung with every step But that did not stop it from prancing happily ahead of them The chickens and ducks were in one basket dangling from the flat pole on Gold Root s shoulder The basket at the other end held Beckon who was a baby then and could not be left alone at home Leaning forward with both hands holding on to the edge of the basket she looked out at the world with her bright fixed gaze

Moon Scent sobbed at the recollection trying to be as quiet as she could about it The fit of weeping finally passed She could tell by the night noises and the dwindling lights in the village that it was getting late Her first uneasiness about Gold Flower had turned to fear

It was now almost pitch dark With a start she perceived a moving figure outlined against the shimmer of the water down below From the little hard knot of hair at the back of the head she could tell a moment later that it was an elderly woman With a sinking heart she realized it was Gold Flower s mother in law com ng in her direction without a lantern

Gold Flower must have let out the secret by accident or on purpose

'The cheap slave girl! Moon Scent swore under her breath 'The putrid dead slave g rl!

She took some time to decide whether it would be wise to reveal herself

There was a rustling in the blackness below Sister in Law Gold Root the woman whispered S ster in Law Gold Root

Ta niung Aunt save us Moon Scent whispered back materializing at her s de

Ai yah Sister in Law Gold Root the woman exclaimed warmly groping for her hands A good thing I heard about this in time! You know Gold Flo ver is a mere child And that son of m ne—the two of them are just a pair of ch ldren If you depended on them to help you it would be d sastrous

Moon Sc nt understood that she was being reprimanded for dar ng to go behind her back. 'We were desperate *Ta n ung* she murmured 'We have nobody to

turn to I am so glad you came I have always known you have a kind heart

Lucky I found out in time the woman repeated or it would be all up with you Our place is so small and crowded and there are many people in the family A bottle s mouth can be stoppered But not human mouths

the

if a relative stays overnight And now—you can imagine how dangerous it would be when they have just been in to warn us At the word *fan ke-min* who is not afraid?

But we are nothing of the sort *Ta niung*—we haven t done anything

She brushed aside Moon Scent s protests Yes and they told us If you know where they are and do not speak out you are accomplices And you ll be tied up with ropes and sent up to the district headquarters Why it is worse than harboring runaway landlords!

Again Moon Scent tried to explain but she would not listen Now that it has come to this the only thing that can save you is to go to town and take the boat there A good thing you are well traveled and know the way to the city She pushed a small bundle into Moon Scent s hand Here I brought you some food I must go now I dare not stay long—it would be dangerous for you as well as for us

Moon Scent clutched at her sleeves *Ta niung* I kneel to you She sank to her knees sobbing overcome by despair and her humiliation before this hateful woman

No no Sister in Law Gold Root don t do that! The

older woman tried to lift her to her feet and failing that also knelt down By returning the obeisance she showed that she did not accept it and so was not put under an obligation by the other s humility Don t think I don t want to help you It is all for your own good Go—as fast as you can It s not safe around here All our neighbors have been alerted

He cannot walk *Ta-niung* Perhaps we can hide in the hills for a few days if *Ta-niung* can tell Gold Flower to send us some food now and then

The woman said sharply How can you spend the night outdoors in this freezing weather? And at daytime you might be seen by woodcutters

'We can go higher up in the hills

Higher up there are wolves She heaved herself to her feet with difficulty trying to wrench herself free of Moon Scent s hand No use your pestering me Start to town right now while it is dark

Moon Scent sobbed aloud hanging on to the woman s clothes How can we go to town with him bleeding like this? How can we get past the sentry at the boat landing?

Better go while you can S ster in Law Gold Root the woman said meaningfully I did not want to tell you this but—go qu ckly I am not sure that one of my sons hasn t already reported you

She broke away and was gone

Moon Scent bel eved her last words were merely a threat to hurry them along However one never knew

She labored uphill hugging the parcel of foodstuff close to her body as f it warmed her And the thought that she was a bringer of food as well as bad news was a ray of varmth n the m dst of her desolation Every

thing looked different in the dark She had difficulty finding that place where she had left Gold Root propped up against a tree At first she thought it was that tall tree over there but she must have been mistaken The way always seemed longer when it was unfamiliar she reminded herself especially in a hostile country where every step was dangerous

But as she walked on the feeling grew on her that she had already passed the spot With mounting panic she turned back to explore the region more carefully Where was he? She had been a long time Had they got him? Or—and she clutched at this idea—had he seen or heard something that frightened him and had hidden himself somewhere?

'Where are you? she whispered groping around 'Beckon's dad where are you?

The open spaces closed around her Her throat swollen from so much whispering hurt as if it had a thick iron ring clamped on it

Wolves! The smell of blood must have lured them down the hill As a rule they never ventured as far down as this but they might in times like this Quite irrationally she assumed that the wolves like human beings were suffering from the man made famine

But then she reasoned with a horrible practicality that if it was the wolves they would have left something shoes or a hand They were not so neat in their habits She searched everywhere in the vicinity Then she found herself looking down at a tree on the bank of the stream There was something odd about that small tree outlined against the gray pallor of the water What seemed to be a large bird's nest nestling in its forked branches was too big, and far too low

She scrambled down the slope With numb icy hands she reached for the bundle on the tree It was his padded jacket with the sleeves tied together to make a neat bundle Wrapped carefully inside was her padded jacket In a moment she understood as well as if he had spoken to her

The pale luminous stream washed past at her feet He had taken with him his padded pants which were torn and bloodstained and past saving But his jacket though old was still serviceable so he left it to her

He wanted her to have a fair chance of getting away He must have known that his wound was more serious than she was willing to admit He never said anything about it But now that she thought back just before she left him under that tree when she straightened up after seeing that he was comfortably settled she had felt his fingers close around her ankle with what seemed then to be a childish impulsiveness and he had held on to her as if he did not want her to go She realized now that that was his moment of indecision The feel of his fingers around her ankle was so real and solid the moment was so close at hand and yet forever out of reach it drove her nearly frantic

After a long time she finally bestirred herself put on her jacket and buttoned it up His jacket she wrapped around her loosely with the sleeves tied under her chin Gone thin and hard with wear the padded jacket stood up stiffly about her ears She rubbed her face on it

Slowly at first then with quickened pace she set out for home

15

AT BIG UNCLE S THEY DID NOT EVEN DARE light the lamp that night They spoke in whispers though Big Uncle always coughed loudly when he shuffled about for fear that he would bump against his daughter in law and make himself a figure of ridicule

Did I not always say so one day these people would get into big trouble he muttered

Big Aunt scolded her daughter in law in a low voice 'Whispering to Gold Root s wife all day long rushing over there whenever people were not looking Now this is fine! Maybe they ll also come and get you And once

they say anti revolutionist do you still expect to live? You think they say it just for fun?

Sister in Law Gold Have Got wept with fright.

Since they came here to search the house it must be that those two were still alive and in hiding somewhere Big Uncle speculated matter-of factly Might have es caped to town and taken the boat from there

How can they get on a boat without a pass? Didn t you hear what she said when she came back? How many questions they ask at the boat landing!

The militiamen came again during the evening Peep-ing through the window in the darkened house the old couple saw them enter bearing lanterns They came out again carrying off Ku s luggage on a flat pole It must be that Ku was staying with Comrade Wong for the night for safety s sake

The militiamen neglected to latch tight the door to Gold Root s rooms It slammed all night in the wind so that Big Aunt could not sleep and she called out to her daughter in law to get up and shut it tight

Ae we must not touch it—must not touch it Big Uncle said in alarm If people find out about it they might think we took something from those rooms Then when all their things are confiscated the blame w ll be put on us if anything is missing

The door banged on with shatter ng savagery

Big Aunt lay awake for a long time l stening to it

her husband I do not think it

think

ing the same

Then Big Aunt real zed with a shock that she had spoken of those t o as if they were already ghosts They

might still be alive and it would bring them bad luck like a curse In her contrition she thought of all their goodness and their youth And her tears fell onto her hard flat old pillow of blue cloth stuffed with the white plumes of reeds

16

WONG S QUARTERS IN THE TEMPLE WAS A dreary place but to Ku after staying with the peasants its aura of literacy made it almost like home The room was long and enormous formerly the chamber of some minor god The shrines and idols had been cleared away but not the age-old dust and cobwebs An oil lamp lit up the only furnished corner where a bed and a littered table and some chairs and benches made up the combined sleeping quarters and office This small area was pervaded by an odor that country people call the old widower s smell caused by loneliness dirt and general neglect It hung all the more heavily in the intense cold of the night

Ku sat on the bed nervously plucking hairs off his upper lip Outside in the great hall of the temple they were torturing the men arrested for the riot

Ai-yah! Ai-yaw! came the rhythmic groans *Uh-ee ee yah!* The voice would weaken and trail off then suddently turn into a straight bestial howl tremendously strong

This could not be true Ku thought It was like a traveler in one of those ghost stories taking shelter in the porches of a temple at night and being wakened by the sound of the gods holding court over the dead Peeping at the brightly lit scene the man in the story recognized a dead relative undergoing cruel tortures He screamed And everything went black and all was quiet in the temple

Scream and perhaps it would all vanish In the city it had always been asserted that the Communists never used torture All the stories of the torture of land lords and suspected spies were lies spread by enemy agents

But what he found hardest to take was that these men groaning on the tiger stool were plain farmers He knew that Wong knew they could not be tools of spies and saboteurs as he had told the village Of course it would sound better in a report to put it that way and

rupu

iad a

stood

for For the thousandth time since the Communists came Ku told himself Believe—for your own good It had become like opium for the intellectuals this faith which would enable them to suffer privations cheerfully deaden

I

accident an isolated instance which had no place in the general picture Represented in all its distressing aspects it would be detrimental to government prestige and would in the long run work against the good of The People Therefore it was important to show The People that it was an incident engineered by enemy agents Wong had to be thorough about it He had to get some

But he found it hard to reason along such lines when he thought of Moon Scent He could not help feeling concerned over her fate If she had been captured and was crying out right now under torture he doubted that he could keep his head

A door creaked open in the far end of the room beyond the reach of the lamplight Ku looked up half expecting to see Moon Scent entering with his nightly warming basket which was at once his comfort and his shame

hard

'Yes, he really should rest Ku said smiling politely 'Especially when he s been hurt

He really should have some rest Just have them hung upside down for the night Tomorrow they d talk all right

Ku inquired casually if Gold Root T'an and his wife had been caught yet Small Chang replied that he had not heard anything about it

It must have been very late when Wong turned in Half asleep Ku was aware of the boards creaking on the bed and the sound of spitting The light went out Then the snoring woke him up completely The man sounded as if he was drinking—gulping down the dense black

o

drift off to sleep again for he woke up with a start A lattered in the hills The Small Chang was in the

'The storehouse is on fire Comrade Wong! shouted Small Chang

Struggling into his padded uniform Wong barked Blow out that lamp!

But Small Chang not having had any combat experience could see no sense in the order and did not know whether he had heard aright In the confusion Ku remembered seeing Wongs sleep-swollen face under his

s

ist underground who were at the back of all this

For some reason the firing had ceased by the time Wong rushed outdoors But dogs were barking while

militiamen ran beating gongs wildly from one end of the village to the other giving the fire alarm Off in the distance they could hear shouts of Fire! Help stop the fire!

Wong with his bandaged head was rushing to and fro shouting himself hoarse Kinsmen! Everybody help stop the fire! Save the storehouse! It s the People s Grain!

But the crowd hung back mindful of the gunfire a while ago until somebody suddenly exclaimed 'Why that was the firecrackers in the storehouse! Firecrackers set off by the fire!

The word was spread around and when it reached Ku inside the temple he took heart and ventured outdoors to do his share of fire fighting

People scurried from all sides toward the stream with buckets and containers of all sorts Some worked doggedly They loved with an impersonal unthinking affection the rice that was the fruit of their labor and their hearts ached more than any miser s to see the great hoard going up in flames Others were gleeful at this unfo eseen turn of events which avenged their own people killed in the riot However they put up a creditable display of enthusiasm yelling at others to stop the fire dashing down the banks for water only to spill most of it on the way

The spilt water froze instantly making the ground very slippery Ku was splashing along with a brimming

ness which [illegible] own leg Then to his horror he discovered that he had fallen over one of the corpses left lying in this vicinity His hands flew to the glasses on his face feeling for them

and straightening them as he scrambled to his feet They might well have been broken And it was this last awful thought that demoralized him completely He retired from the scene to become the sole onlooker shivering as the water soaked through his jacket

They were still beating away at the gongs The ceaseless clanging awakened an ancient terror as if the village was being invaded by bandits Across the grounds bathed in the wild crimson glow militiamen dashed away brandishing their red tufted lances One of them claimed he had seen a woman sneaking away when the blaze first started and he had chased her right into the fire

As he watched the gongs and the soaring flames roused a wild primitive exultation in Ku But this is just what I am looking for he thought A splendid and stirring spectacle for the climax of my film Just move the story a few years back. Recount how the peasants under the old regime were driven by hunger to rob and burn the storehouse

Then he remembered that there had been explicit instructions in the leading magazines for literary people Writers were not to dwell on the unsavory past as if with a lingering relish but to turn to the bright new constructive side Rather than curse the darkness praise the light!

He cursed anyway watching the dying fire The storehouse had been picked clean to the bones The frame stood out clear in the brilliant sheet of flames Giant black cinders perched birdlike on the beams Aptly called fire magpies and fire crows those evil birds sat in a row turning their heads this way and that with dreadful tranquillity in the softening golden light

17

'Wait a moment Gold Flower said to her husband Plenty Own as they were walking away from the *Hsien* Public Security Bureau The strap on one of her cloth shoes had come loose To button it up she stood on one foot putting a hand on his arm to steady herself

Gold Flower had been summoned to the market town to identify a corpse found in the river It could have drifted there from upstream and the description fitted Gold Root but they wanted her confirmation

It had been a hard day for her Plenty Own told himself The long walk along the river to the market town and the farmers they passed staring at the two of them

walking between the policemen Then the view of the body stretched out on a rough trestle under the light of a single electric lamp in the shed in back of the police station Aware of the police eyes watching them for some sign of emotion Plenty Own stared down at the corpse of his brother in law mildly surprised that he had no more feeling than he did 'My brother he heard his wife say quietly

It was the first time he had seen a bullet hole the wound in the flesh of the thigh had been washed clean and the lips of the hole were almost bloodless The police led them outside for questioning Finally a comrade in charge was satisfied asked them to sign some papers they could not read and let them go The final question of the disposal of the body—'We ll take care of things unless you have some other plan the comrade had said meaningly Plenty Own nodded it would be better if they didn t bring Gold Root back to their own village

While Gold Flower was leaning on him to button her shoe he brought his face close to hers with a slight turn of his head He was not looking at her but she felt self conscious at this expression of sympathy and her face became more set in its absorbed inward look that masked her feelings or rather the absence of them

Any shock she might have felt at the sight of her brother s body had been well insulated by the numbing sense of strangeness all round Above all it was strange to be walking about with her husband in town in the evening They seldom ever went out together Just now in their long trip to town they had been oppressed by the ominous presence of the two policemen who accompanied them but now they were by themselves Plenty Own took care not to betray the pleasure he felt He

would have been very surprised to learn that it was shared

They came to the wharf with all the lighted boats bobbing below in the shimmering darkness In the dim gold interior of one sampan they could see a bamboo tube nailed on the wall of matting to hold a bunch of red lacquered chopsticks On other craft the oil lamps shone through the wash lines One boat was dark on the stern a silhouetted figure stood urinating into the river

Coolies carrying goods and luggages on bamboo poles side-stepped cautiously down the dizzy gray flight of broad shallow stone steps a huge ancient pile of stones dreamlike under the yellow electric light Rifled militia men shouted questions across the water Owners of boats who had a touch of the gangster about them swaggered down the steps with their padded jackets unbuttoned down the front and their leather slippers flip-flapping loudly

Past the wharf the water front became dark and deserted The shops were still closed for the New Year But farther down there seemed to be something going on and a small crowd had collected around it Gold Flower and her husband stopped to look A bystander explained It s that boatman who got drunk on New Year s Eve and fell overboard A strange time to die—on New Year s Eve So they re holding the ceremony here on the riverbank

About seven or eight mourners knelt in a row each holding the one in front of him by the waist The head mourner who knelt in front was a little boy probably the son of the drowned man The traditional white cloth curtain wound around the mourners ending in a knot tied over the boy s forehead The weeping must have been going on for a long time The men were hoarse and the

women merely moaned weakly with much murmuring under their breaths But there was one of them who set up a weird high pitched howl that went over their heads on and off like a doleful wind The boy s head dipped forward rhythmically with the fits of weeping bowing lower and lower Set before him on the ground was a basket of ashes holding joss sticks

There were more joss sticks and a tall white pair of lighted candles on a square t ble that stood a little way off Two men who were neither monks nor Taoist priests sat side by side at the head of the table These were professional reciters of popular Buddhist verses They were both about thirty looking like shop assistants in their shabby long gowns They intoned the verses in unison their bodies swaying from side to side in the manner of schoolboys reading out loud The long rambling half prayer was in Chinese instead of Sanskrit but Gold Flower could make out only a few lines here and there It mentioned the name of the deceased and the place he had come from the age he had attained the surname of his wife s family the number and sex of his children It spoke of all this with a quiet satisfaction and prayed for his speedy passage into another existence as a human being preferably a man

I ll have the same rites performed for Brother Gold Flower suddenly said to herself Not right now but later when this talk of *fan kê-min* has blown over She felt it would free him from the painfully extraordinary circumstances of his death and make him the same as everybody else The prayer seemed to have this effect While the voices droned on by the flickering candlelight on the darkening shore the dead man was being gently lowered into the sea of humanity

She promised her brother s spirit then and there that she would arrange for the recitation of prayers and also the adoption of a boy child for his heir that he might be mourned properly She would bring up the child and later see to his marriage so that her brother s branch of the family would not die out She would do her duty toward the T ans as she had toward the Chous Her eyes brimmed with tears at the thought of all that she would do for her brother And she truly grieved for him for the first time since disaster befell him

The child to be adopted had to be born a T an Perhaps Big Aunt might be persuaded to part with one of her grandsons She had several

It had been snowing B g Aunt went out into the fields
[illegible] et with
There
e gate

Big Aunt?

Don t talk nonsense Big Aunt looked nervously around her My grandson is so terribly sick and you have the heart to joke with me

It was her youngest grandson Everybody said he must have run against something crossed the path of some spirit and incurred its displeasure It was hardly surpris ing seeing that there had been so many deaths in the village

Big Aunt knew exactly what it was

The day after the fire when the villagers had been set to work clearing up the rubble a body had been discov

ered in a cave made between two walls propped up by each other when they had caved in It was in a sitting position and was a smooth bright pinkish red all over The color had stood out glaringly against the charred ruins It had occurred to Big Aunt—to all of them in fact who had been there—that the seated figure suggested one of the bald slim images of Arhans lined up on both sides of a temple She had been deeply shocked and awed She also remembered that monks when they die are always cremated in a big jar sitting up It was very odd and would seem to speak of divine origins in Gold Root s wife—for the body was that of a woman and she knew that it was she This Moon Scent must have been at least a gifted monk in her last life

She had known it was Moon Scent but like every body else she had held her tongue It was one thing to [illegible] t in the riot and another thing to burn down the [illegible] hat [illegible] t to [illegible] orm leave matters vague Who would [illegible] retribution would come? The whole village might be demolished as in the Japanese days

Even the Chairman of the Farmers Association had pretended that he could not tell who it was Then Com rade Wong had appeared on the scene and insisted that it was Moon Scent And the militiaman on duty at the storehouse the night before had turned up and excitedly repeated his story of having chased a prowler back into the burning building

I wouldn t be surprised if it was Gold Root T'an s wife the Chairman of the Farmers Association had finally admitted She s been away for three years work ing in the city Who knows what bad company she might

have got into spies and Kuomingtang agents? Here she s been back scarcely a month and this has happened Must have been sent here on a special mission

Then Big Aunt had chimed in I m not one to speak ill of the dead but that one is a real fox and a broom star I ve always known that she couldn t be trusted alone in the city Must have picked up some gangster some *fan ke-min* Poor Gold Root—she led him around by the nose See how he had changed after she came back and he used to be so good and progressive Ask Comrade Wong And the way she beat her little girl! Just like a stepmother! Ask Comrade Ku He knows And the things she said to me when we had our quarrel! I never spoke a single word to her after that Never Ask anybody

Afterward when she had returned home she had found that her grandson was down with fever She hadn t said anything to Sister in Law Gold Have Got not wishing to alarm her But in her heart she had quickly addressed herself to Moon Scent Now don t be angry Sister in Law Gold Root When alive you were human after death you are divine You won t stoop to plague a child will you? And when he s your nephew too

The child s fever had mounted during the night This morning Big Aunt had gone out grimly resolved to burn joss money at Moon Scent s grave and risk being caught at it

He s your nephew remember she kept murmuring to Moon Scent I might have offended you but his mother hasn t You used to be such good friends, [illegible]

1 A broom-sta [illegible] m teo which is rega d [illegible] d h com to ta d f [illegible] w man wh rui [illegible]

ber? Spare the boy and when he grows up he ll bum joss money at your grave at the New Year and all the important festivals He ll be like a son to you

The snow laden bamboos by the roadside had thick fat white leaves The green undersides of the leaves wove in and out of the whiteness when the wind came The ashes in her basket got blown into her face She would light the joss money with the live charcoal Her eyes and nose were running in the stinging cold The arm was get ting cramped that held the long string of silver paper cups under her padded jacket It had to be held high so

the fields for Moon Scent s grave which she knew would be difficult to locate The body had been rolled up in a mat and laid in a shallow hole which was merely covered up with no mound built above it

She saw a yellow patch way over there beside the forked footpath Is that it? she wondered That couldn t be the earth showing through the snow could it? No snow on her grave! Her knees went weak with awe

The sound of dogs snarling floated across the distance faint but with a distilled clearness She wiped her eyes and saw that the heaving yellow patch was a pack of wild dogs fighting over the grave They must have bur rowed into the ground and pawed it open She thought she could see a corner of the straw mat showing under the heaped canine bodies

It s a sin It s a sin Big Aunt muttered as she moved away flooded with relief She certainly can t do any

body any harm she thought if she can t even protect her own bones

Ku had been sitting facing Comrade Wong every day across the desk Wong with his graying bandages had many reports to write and Ku busied himself with his script He had finally managed to work the fire into his story of the dam No small problem because how can a dam burn?

The way the story went now the engineer and old peasants collaborated to solve the problem of the annual floods by building a dam across the stream However in this village lived a landlord who had survived the Land Reform through the generosity of the government He was allowed his acre of land like everybody else and so far he still managed to live better than the others with much furtive feasting and hasty clearing of dishes when the authorities called And the potbellied old man still enjoyed the company of a beautiful girl presumably his concubine Perhaps it would be better not to stress her marital status since concubinage should not continue to exist under the People s Government Her main function was to lean decoratively against the table by the light of the flickering lamp and lend atmosphere to the various treasonable dealings of the dispossessed landlord She would look something like Moon Scent Ku had refrained from going down to see the body found in the storehouse after the fire so his memory of her remained unspoiled In the film it would be summer and the girl would be wearing a striped cotton summer shirt. It would have to be decorously sacklike but stripes could do wonders

The landlord was approached by a spy who enlisted his services conferring on him the rank of a general in

the Nationalist Army Accompanied by his concubine the landlord skulked out at night to bomb the new dam A vigilant militiaman detected them in time but they managed to get away without being identified

When the spy put pressure on him to show some results the landlord in desperation set fire to the government storehouse He was caught red handed together with the concubine who scurried in his wake carrying a small bundle They were probably thinking of fleeing the country after the deed The bundle contained among other valuables his treasured credentials of a Nationalist general

Ku was well pleased with the story It was a neat piece of work But it would have to be a very small fire One or two sacks of rice had barely started to smoke when a guard had already rounded the corner shouting Fire! Fire! Saboteurs! Otherwise it would reflect on the efficiency of the local militia Wrathful newspapers would call it the indiscriminate use of the weapon of satire on the people's own organizations far exceeding the bounds of constructive criticism The film would not be banned which would attract too much attention to it but just quietly withdrawn in the middle of its showing And any chance of making a name for himself would be gone for good

The comfort visit to the Soldiers Families had to be postponed because the firecrackers had been destroyed in the fire and at this late date it was impossible to replace them After the fifth day of the first moon when the shops reopened after the New Year Comrade Wong got up another collection from the farmers and made a special trip to town to buy more firecrackers

Early next morning the people assembled outside the Village Public Office The paraders lined up The Rice Sprout Song Corps went in front after them came the gift bearers They struck up the gongs and cymbals The dancers started the routine steps the men and women side by side in two rows their painted cheeks startlingly red in the cold gray morning light The gift bearers crouched under their flat poles and then straightened up with an effort The pale bloated halves of slaughtered pigs cut lengthwise dangled at the ends of the poles Pigs heads sitting in trays had little pink paper flowers tucked rakishly in their ears Other trays held the white slabs of New Year cakes hard as bricks stacked into high mounds

Comrade Wong saw that the two l nes of dancers were straggly from the loss of men in the riot He motioned to Comrade Small Chang who went up to the elderly folks standing around looking and spoke to them Presently

[illegible]

gle the Rice Sprout Song [illegible]

back and forth

Comrade Wong turned to find Ku standing by his side He jerked his head toward Big Aunt as she danced past Sixty-seven this year he said smiling and so enthusiastic

Sixty-eight with the New Year Big Aunt corrected him jauntily as if slightly offended

Sixty-eight Wong repeated to Ku with pride

The dancing stopped soon after they passed into the open fields to be resumed later when they drew near the

... kept up their
carcasses
... proceeded slowly along the winding footpath that led across the tawny brown plain The gongs and cymbals went on *beating loudly*

CHONG CHONG! CHI CHONG CHI!
CHONG CHONG! CHI CHONG CHI!

But under the immense open sky the sound was muffled and strangely faint